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A SONG OF THE TIDE

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A SONG OF THE TIDE

by
ERNEST RAYMOND



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FOR
LELLA DEIRDRE RAYMOND

PART I

A SONG OF THE TIDE

I

IN the morning, when London summons its workers, the traffic races down Brixton Hill like a stream spilling itself down a long waterslide to the flat lands below. Or like a migration. Clanging trams, drumming buses, droning cars, sighing bicycles—the great migration slips down the declivity to the crowded plain, and it gives no more thought to the tall houses on either side than a hurrying river to the high poplars on its banks. It swirls over Brixton Crossways where the five roads meet, and sweeps onward down the wide Brixton Road, scattering its human particles into factories, warehouses, offices and shops till at Kennington it splits into a delta and takes the great roads that lead to the bridges over the Thames. Now in divided streams it pours towards the bridges of Vauxhall, Westminster, Waterloo, London, and the Tower. It has watered a great part of South London and reached the bank on the Surrey side. And Brixton Hill with its tall houses is forgotten.

But it is a mistake to forget Brixton Hill. One should not pass its tall houses without sight or thought. One should loiter down its pavements, looking over the garden railings and up the long green avenues, considering the porticoed doors and the curtained windows, and thinking. Above all, thinking. One should stroll down the gradual hill like a man with a satchel, and at the foot, at Brixton Crossways, one's satchel should be full: full of history, full of poetry, full of garnered vision, and heavy with cosmic questioning. And there should be some shreds of beauty in the bag.

Come then, consider the tall houses on the right-hand side as you go down the hill. They are as various as the history of two hundred years. Old lonely houses of the eighteenth century; high Victorian red-brick villas arrayed in terraces; earlier Victorian mansions, grey and solemn and portly, whose coach-houses and haylofts speak of a dead prosperity (and it is with one of these that we

shall have to deal); more red-brick villas; more grey mansions; and then, in its railed acre and amid its black altar tombs, God's house, the dark Doric temple of Brixton Church, piled up by the people of Lambeth to celebrate God's correct attitude at Waterloo. The railings of the churchyard touch the foot of the hill, and so we are at the swirling Crossways and the beginning of the plain.

Now, almost all these houses stand far back from the road, at the top of long narrow gardens; and the gardens are shadowed by tall spreading trees and shut from the pavement by railings flanked by cement-capped piers. And a remarkable, a significant, thing is to be seen in the cement-capped piers. They all rock; they rock this way and that; and not one of them, down the whole length of the hill leans the same way.

They have sagged; and their sagging tells us that a monarch rules the hill, whose name is Decay. King Decay rules Brixton Hill and all the neighbourhood for miles around. It cannot be helped; it is inevitable; his is a spreading empire trailing behind the retreat of Time; and now his Law sits on all that arc of hills that swings from one point of the curving river to another—it sits, that is to say, on the hills of Wandsworth, Clapham, Brixton, Camberwell, Lewisham, and Blackheath; it occupies—it has long occupied—the level lands at their feet, Stockwell and Kennington, Vauxhall and Walworth and Southwark; and it reaches at last the crowded riverside backs, behind the loop of the waterfront, where there has never been much grandeur to decay.

Of course in so wide an empire there are parts which he has failed to subdue, there are houses which are straight and comely, but in the main the grey monarch has his way. You can see his work everywhere, flaking the stucco, griming the bricks, slanting the chimneys, breaking the gates, and poisoning the turf and the trees. He works with the creeping crack, the lifting damp, and the worm in the wood. Some of the fine old houses on Brixton Hill he has made derelict altogether, boarding up their windows and raising the wilderness again in their gardens. Some of the long Brixton gardens he has buried beneath asphalt and turned into marts for the sale of second-hand cars. "Car Sales. Car Sales," cry the notices. "Cars Bought, Sold, and Exchanged." Very clean, safe, and invulnerable, very still and everlasting, seems the blue sky arched above his handiwork.

This work is most evident, I suggest, on Brixton Hill or Clapham Rise because their houses were so stately once and some of their trees keep a splendour yet. Why, in some of the gardens you may even see a yellow statue under the drooping trees. But the long drives are wet, and the weeds are narrowing them, and the lawns are mangy, and the railings are rusty; and if you peep beneath

the branches, you will see that nearly all the windows have different curtains, and you will know what that means. If you don't, the boards above the railings will tell you. "Apartments," they say. "Flat to let. Unfurnished Rooms. Furnished Bed-sitting Rooms. Bed and Breakfast." The old gentry have gone with their carriages, as the beadle has gone from Brixton Church; the well-to-do merchants have gone, and the middle-class Victorians; and the landladies are in possession, unconscious commissars of the grey monarch's rule.

But again, let me not slander them all. Let me not call a plague on all their houses. Let me admit that most of the landladies are honest and hard-working, and their rooms bright and welcoming; that the lodgers for the most part are a lively race; and that all the children are charming. Let me admit that it is only a man devoted to melancholy who will think that any crime might be done in these sombre houses behind the trees.

§

The houses of Brixton Hill seem rather silent because of the long gardens and the trees. The whole hill slope would seem rather silent if it were not for the traffic tumbling down into the midst of South London. But it is quite different when you are over the hustling circus of Brixton Crossways and walking in Brixton Road. Here, on an acre or so, is the most famous shopping district in South London. All the women of the neighbourhood, the women from the uplands and the women from the plain, converge upon this throbbing and noisy mart; and many of their sisters from over the river come too, in buses and trams and trains. Every fashion of retail salesmanship is here, from the coster's barrow to the great store. Station Road is a strident street market. Atlantic Road is a procession of small, shouting shops. Electric Avenue is an arcade whose pavements are roofed for the shoppers with iron and glass. Market Row is a covered market exactly like the roofed bazaars of Damascus and Bagdad, though its drift of people is a somewhat dingier tide. On Brixton Road are the great universal stores. Cheapness is the flag that flies over the whole area and draws the women. Indeed, its sovereign store proclaims the fact, for it is known all over London as the Bon Marché. And as if the noise of the yelling costers, the shouting shopmen, and the chattering women were not enough, the trains roar above it on two high viaducts that cross each other as they stride over the plain towards the bridges.

At night there is a glow in the sky above this ring of salesmanship: it is thrown by the naphtha flares, the brilliant windows, the red Neon signs, and the floodlights. And in the heart of the glamour burns a single star from the cupola of the Empress Theatre like the star over the inn at Bethlehem, where Love was but a small visitor and crowded into a corner.

II

ABOUT half-way up Brixton Hill, at the top of a long untidy garden, is a large grey house. It is one of the old portly mansions, detached, square, with a window on either side of its pillared portico, and three windows above. A carriageway, now narrowed by the moss to a mere path, leads straight from the garden gate to the front steps. On an elm tree by the gate is a notice board which says :

ALDOUS HOUSE
Furnished Bed-sitting Rooms
From 10/- a Week

and on the railings by the gate is a plaque of grey stone with black lettering :

MR. VICTOR MUSWELL
L.R.A.M.
TEACHER OF PIANOFORTE

That this stone plaque should be cracked right across is an excellent symbol of something we shall find within.

At half-past seven on a spring morning some seven or eight years ago, when the times were uneasy and violent, this house was quiet enough in front, but behind its façade the landlady was beginning her day. A large-hipped woman with a mass of bobbed grey hair, she was frying eggs in her kitchen. At the moment she was almost as unkempt as her garden in front (though she

would spruce herself up later): the bobbed grey hair was only roughly combed, the full, flopping body was tied up in a green overall, the thick calves were bare, and the reddened feet were loose in old blue slippers. Like many landladies she was a woman with a tired face and searching, suspicious eyes. These eyes had no trust in the unscrutinized world. They seemed to distrust the eggs in the pan, the steam from the kettle, and the behaviour of the gas cooker. They cast distrustful looks at the clock. They frowned as she listened to sounds above the ceiling. So narrowed and inimical were they that they spoiled a face which might otherwise have been pretty, with its small, neat features and full, round cheeks. It was a face, one suspected, which might also have been kind if the slaps of life and the slick tricks of lodgers had spared it.

You must not picture her kitchen as a basement room. All her basement rooms were let, as were all the rooms in the house except those on the ground floor which she and her family occupied. Her kitchen was the fine old conservatory at the back of the house; and the morning sun, pouring through coloured glass, splashed her grey hair and her firm white arms with red and blue and gold. It was a joke of Mrs. Muswell's, who could laugh at times, that if she cooked after eight in the morning, she had to do it in her hat.

The worried and searching eyes looked again at the alarm clock on a shelf; and she came through the French windows into the large living-room. Standing there, she called through the open door, "Roddy, Roddy"; and then "Gilly, Gilly"; which she pronounced "Jilly."

"Righto!" cried a young voice from across the dark passage.

"O.K., Ma," shouted a deeper and older voice. "Keep cool. Always keep cool."

"It's nearly half-past seven," she added.

"Is it? I'm just coming, Auntie," called the younger voice.

"All right, all right, all *right*!" protested the older. "Keep your shirt intact. Keep your hair on. Keep smiling."

A minute later the owner of the soft young voice came into the living-room. He was a boy of sixteen, but his face looked younger, with its round healthy cheeks, its unformed nose, and its brown hair tumbling into the blue eyes. The eyes were large and, as we shall see, extraordinarily expressive: a word could change their twinkling laughter into a spark of fear; a word could cancel their bright attention and cloud them with thought; a word, if unfavourable, could start in them the flash of resentment and pain. The boy was fairly tall for sixteen and evidently still growing fast, for his baggy flannel trousers were many inches too short, and so was the blue jacket which he was dragging on as he entered the room. So round a face with such childishly sensitive eyes, set at

the top of a long-limbed, coltish body, gave him in full measure the pathos of adolescence.

Mrs. Muswell's keen eyes looked at him ; and it was not a loving look. It was not a hostile look, either ; it was merely not loving. It was the look of an aunt, not of a mother. Some might have thought it a guilty look.

"You'll have to hurry, Roddy. For pity's sake don't go losing *this* job."

"I've never lost a job," said the boy, shaking his shoulders into the jacket. "They've lost me."

"Oh, really? And who are you, I'd like to know, to talk so big? You'll leave a job once too often, and then where'll you be?"

"I shall be all right," he assured her, sitting at his place at the long table. "I shall look after myself all right. And all I know is, I'm not staying a day longer at Morton's than I need. Not likely."

"Well, I think it's ridiculous to talk so," said Mrs. Muswell, putting an egg and fried bread before him. "Perfectly idiotic."

The boy flushed at the word "idiotic"; turned white; and then told himself that he was being idiotic in letting the word hurt him: it was only a way of speaking. So he laughed and demanded, "Why idiotic?"

"Because you're not in a position to talk like that. You ought to get a job, and stick to it, and work your way up in it. You've only yourself to depend upon."

"Lummy, I know that!"

Mrs. Muswell halted on her way to the sideboard and looked at him suspiciously. "What do you mean?"

He shrugged. "I'm not afraid of my future."

"Oh, it's easy to say things like that, but what are you doing about it?"

"I've got my own ideas."

"And what are they?"

"They're all right," he announced cheerfully, peppering his egg.

"Well, I don't know. . . . I should have thought the best thing to do was to settle down, take a pride in your job, and try to make a success of it."

"Pride in my job! Gum! Pride in slaving for old Byng! No, I *don't* think."

"Mr. Byng said there were good prospects in it if you worked hard and were trustworthy."

"And it was all lies. It was all lies. Dirty lies." Suddenly his eyes had flashed and his cheeks flushed. Often his own words could move him like this to anger. Sometimes, if they were pathetic, they could move him to tears. "Managers always say

that, and they've no intention of doing anything for you. All the fellows know it. And why the hell one should work hard for ten bob a week and no prospects I can't see. And even if, by an outside chance, one of the assistants left and old Byng gave me the job, I should still be only a grocer's assistant in a dirty little shop at twenty bob a week. And I want to do something more with my life than that. Something very much more."

"And what, pray?"

"Oh, something. . . ."

"Yes, but *what*? 'Something' never got one anywhere. Something's nothing, so long as it's only something."

"Oh, I dunno. P'raps I haven't made my mind up yet. There's buckets of time." The flash of anger had gone like summer lightning, and he was lively again. "All I know is, I'm not staying put where I am. I'm not particularly proud of being an errand boy. 'A strong lad able to cycle.' Hell, no!"

Mrs. Muswell had been loading a tray for one of her bed-and-breakfast gentlemen upstairs, but as he said this she stopped and looked at him sharply. No question now that this was a guilty look.

"What do you mean by that? What do you mean by 'put'? I suppose you don't think we could have put you to anything better? We should have liked to, I'm sure, but there was no money. You know that well enough. There was nothing else we could do for you. I was able to do something for Gilly and Belle by dint of slaving here, but your mother did all she could for you when she paid a bit towards your keep here—and not so very much, I may tell you—I'm sure I've often been hard put to make it do. I'm sure I've done all I possibly could for you always. Everybody says so. I'm sure we'd all have liked to put you to a trade, same as Gilly and Belle, but——"

"I don't want a trade. That's not my idea at all."

"Well, what *is* your idea? In heaven's name——"

But he only nodded knowingly, smiled mysteriously, and said nothing. He munched his fried bread and drank his tea, while Mrs. Muswell fixed her intent gaze on him for a few seconds more, before turning away.

She need not have felt guilty. He had not been criticizing her. Roddy Stewart was not yet old enough to criticize parents or guardians for their handling of his career; he was at an age of simple acceptance. He accepted the present and hoped large things of the future. Serenely, but secretly, he believed that he was going to be something big in the world—something spectacular—something much bigger than Gilly or Belle—something that would surprise them, and Mr. and Mrs. Muswell, one day. There had been nothing in his life so far to justify this proud certainty,

except his need to feel it ; but the need was stronger than reason, stronger than sanity, strong as the sap in a hard-pruned tree, strong as the kick of a tethered foal. What the "something" would be he did not yet know. At sixteen he was content to dream, now of one thing, now of another, but of all things vaguely.

Mrs. Muswell continued the loading of her breakfast tray. "Was Gilly getting dressed?" she asked.

"More or less."

"Well, it's time he was having his breakfast. It's getting late." Lifting her voice, she called through the door again, "Gilly . . . Gilly . . . it's well after half-past seven. Your breakfast'll be getting cold. Come along, dear." This call to Gilly was faintly different in accent from her call to Roddy ; it was the call of a mother.

"O.K., Ma," called the voice from across the passage. "O.K., old darling. Shan't be long. Things are going splendidly."

"Well, do hurry up. You don't want it all cold."

"I'm coming, sweetheart. Go and slang Belle for a bit. Or the Old Man. There's nothing doing in his direction yet, as far as I can hear."

"Come on. There's a good boy." And she passed out with her tray.

A minute later Gilly entered : an exceedingly neat figure in striped trousers, black jacket, stiff collar, and black tie. Gilly Muswell was a junior salesman at Vance's, the old established and very respectable firm of Furnishers and Upholsterers in Brixton Road, and they insisted on the black coat and striped trousers. He was a lad of nineteen, but looked older than his years, as Roddy looked younger : perhaps because he was much darker than Roddy, and the dark types mature more quickly. Actually he was an inch or two shorter than Roddy, but you would never have guessed it, because the maturity of his shoulders, his features, and his dress seemed to give him height. His black hair had a natural tight wave that ended in crisp curls—a wave so perfect as to be almost a misfortune, since at times it looked artificial and suggested the visit of a fop to the Ladies' Hairdresser. His brown eyes were short-sighted, and the thick lenses of his spectacles magnified them into sheep's eyes. But there was nothing sheepish in their expression : they were alight with self-confidence and fun, for Gilly, like most lads bred by the London pavements, had a pretty opinion of his own powers, and always his ebullient spirits frothed up into impudence, nonsense, and ribaldry.

Taking his chair at the table, he rubbed his hands together as one who would enjoy the meal before him, and the day to come.

"Good morning, Mr. Stewart," said he to Roddy, as if he had not seen him before, nor shared the same bedroom and the same washstand.

"Morning, Faceache," responded Roddy.

Gilly acknowledged this with a sideways bow, and inquired, "All alone? Where's everybody? Where's Mrs. Muswell?"

"Gone up with old Smithson's breakfast."

"And what's her condition this morning? Down or up? Is it one of her better mornings, or is she?"—and he turned down his thumbs and the corners of his mouth.

"She's not exactly sunny."

"Dammit, there's a ridge of low pressure, is there? Eggs? Hell! Always eggs. Evidently Mrs. Muswell's getting 'em cheap just now. I shall have to change my lodging house. A ridge of low pressure, eh? Is it bad? Is it likely to approach gale force at times?"

"I dunno."

"Has she threatened the gas oven yet?"

"No."

"Golly, you don't seem too bright, either."

"I'm all right, ta, thank you."

"Oh well, as long as she hasn't started talking about the gas oven, there's hope. The depression may fill up. I'll do my best. Chuck us the salt, old bean. And where's the Glamour Girl? Any sight of her?"

"I heard her moving about her bedroom."

"The amazing child! Absolutely happy if she's fiddling with her hair or painting her finger nails. Doesn't care a damn for any of the rest of us. And the Old Man? Has he started creaking yet?"

"Haven't heard him."

"What a man!" exclaimed Gilly, swallowing tea through a mouthful of egg. "Though I say it meself, as is his son, what a man! Do you think he's a coiner, Roddy? Or do you think he owns a brothel somewhere?"

"Why?"

"Well, everybody knows he hasn't earned ten bob a week for the last five years, and yet he's always got money to rattle in his pocket. Always able to pay for drinks at the Prince of Wales. Beats me. D'you think he sings in the street somewhere? Somewhere out Norwood way? D'you think he plays a violin outside the pubs of Clapham? It beats Ma too. Keeps her awake at night, puzzling it out. I can see that, though she never says a word about it. In short, it's driving her fast to the gas oven. 'S' a mystery——"

His patter was arrested by the entrance of Belle. Belle Muswell,

seventeen years old, was just completing her third year as an apprentice to a Ladies' Hairdresser in Electric Avenue, and she looked the part exactly. Her brown hair was most skilfully curled and set in the latest mode; her pretty, if hard, face, somewhat thinned at the cheeks by studious slimming, was powdered and tinted with a professional hand, the eyes delicately mascara'd, and the lips a scarlet bow. Her hands were manicured, with long, tinted nails. Her body, compact and shapely, though too short in the legs, was wrapped in an overall of egg-shell blue. She looked as firmly set and efficient as her curls.

"Good morning, miss," her brother greeted her. "Enter the Glamour Girl."

"Don't be a fool, Gil," was her only reply, as she went to a chair by Roddy's side and opened a woman's journal which she had picked up from the front door mat.

"There you are!" sighed Gilly. "Sour. No more chatty than you are, Roddy. Here am I, full of chat on a fine morning, and everybody's about as talkative as a dead wireless set. Extraordinary thing about our family that no two members of it are chatty at the same time!"

"Wait till Daddy appears," recommended Belle, her eyes sunk in her journal.

"Ah, yes . . ." agreed Gilly.

"He's just about your level."

"Well, at least he's a cheerful bloke. Hallo, here's Mum. Morning, Mrs. Muswell."

"Good morning, Gilly."

"Your daughter's arrived. Smart little bit of work, isn't she?"

"You leave Belle alone. Don't be always getting at her."

"Christ! You don't think *I* mind what he says, do you?" scoffed Belle, without lifting her eyes from her magazine.

"Where's Pa, Ma?"

"How should I know?"

"H'm. There you are. Ma isn't matey, either. She's——"

But the front door bell rang, and Mrs. Muswell who had just taken her seat at the foot of the table leapt up and ran from the room. Gilly winked at Roddy. Belle did not trouble to look up from her reading.

"The post," said Roddy.

"Sh!" commanded Gilly. "Who's going to get there first?"

"She is, you can bet your life."

"Well, it's bad luck on the Old Man, because he doesn't half do a sprint. Sh! Listen . . . There he goes. But she's done him. Ma's won. Well, *I* say it's love letters."

"Don't be quite mad," muttered Belle.

"Why mad? What's so mad in it? You can never tell with these picturesque old boys. Some idiot of a girl——"

"He'd never let her write here time after time, knowing that Mummy generally gets her eyes on the envelopes before he does."

"But he's letting *someone* do it, silly! Or what's she trying to get wise to?"

"God knows. But what does it matter, anyway?"

"It matters to me. I take an intelligent interest in the old bouncer's activities. I want to know. He amuses me. He——"

"Shut up. Here he comes."

§

Mr. Muswell came in. He came in, three paces behind his wife, and holding three letters in his hand. His tread was slow, deliberate, and stately. A tall man, rounding at the paunch, he walked always with a slow, stately tread, his shoulders back, his stomach forward, and his large feet stepping firmly in front of him, their toes turned outward. This morning, on these heavy, splayed, but dignified feet, he padded to the table and, standing behind his chair, gazed at the family.

"Good morning, all," he said. "Good morning to you. Our Belle? How is she? Our Roddy? Our Gilly? Our Mother?" To each, as he named them, he gave a graceful little bow. "Not that I haven't met your mother before, in bedchamber and in hall, but there! let me wish her well. And now for some food. Is there food? There is. Excellent." And he sat down, laying the letters, unopened, by the side of his plate. "An egg. Well, it might be worse. Gilly, pass me salt; Belle, pass me pepper. Roddy, cut me bread . . . And then someone pass me butter. Thank you. Thank you. And then kindly observe my post. What a post for a gentleman to come down to! Two bills and a circular. Are there no letter-writers abroad? Have I no friends anywhere in the world? Two bills, and a circular."

Mr. Muswell illustrated well the common observation that if two people live long enough together, they tend to grow like each other. In no single feature, nor in his bodily shape, did he resemble Mrs. Muswell, and yet . . . Perhaps it was his thick grey hair at the top of a figure growing corpulent; abstract greyness

of hair, as it were, above abstract corpulence. His head was quite bald at the crown, but he cultivated, as musicians do, dense shrubs on either side; and these thickets of silver-grey hair stood out above his ears like the branchings of some silver scrub on a clean stone in the desert: each of them seemed wider than the long handsome face between them. Always untidy, they were a riot in these morning hours before they had felt the comb. They gave him a foreign look, as they were designed to do. Till you heard his drawling English voice you might have guessed him a Pole or a White Russian or a Finn. Had he fulfilled his dreams and become a famous composer, conductor or pianist, he had intended to tour the halls under some such name as Mussgorski. But he had created none of his dreams, and was still Mr. Victor Muswell, Teacher of Pianoforte on Brixton Hill; and even the little stone plaque which proclaimed this at his gate was, as we saw, cracked right across like a forgotten tombstone.

Still, the wild grey hair and the heavy-footed, splayed, but stately gait, lent him some distinction, even this morning when he was dressed in nothing but an old pair of blue trousers, an alpaca jacket, and a shirt without collar and tie.

"Two bills, and a circular. Look at 'em. Children, look at 'em. Two bills, and a circular. Is there a request from anyone for a course of twelve lessons on the pianoforte? There is not. Is there a handsome cheque for services rendered? There is not. Is there a publisher's enthusiastic acceptance of my latest song? There is not. Is there an invitation to conduct the London Philharmonic? There is no such thing. Is there even a commission to accompany the talent at the Oddfellows' Smoker? I repeat, there is not."

"Oh, do stop it, Victor," pleaded his wife.

"Bills," continued Mr. Muswell. "Just bills. And 'Mr. V. Muswell,' if you please. No 'Esquire.' Why, it's the way you address your butcher. And 'V. Muswell.' Just 'V. Muswell,' as if I hadn't spent my life trying to establish the professional name of Victor Muswell. I pay no bills addressed to V. Muswell. Ah well, I've missed the mark, and now, like Othello, my occupation's gone . . . I'm no more use in the world . . . The wheel of the wagon is broken." Mr. Muswell had a fine gift of pathetic utterance, and enjoyed exploiting it. "Well, I admit my defeat, and accept it with dignity. I've outstayed my welcome, and there's nothing to do now but await my call. There's no staging a fine come-back now . . . I've slipped, and I'm ready to sleep . . . A foiled, circuitous wanderer . . ."

"You'd better hurry up, Roddy," warned Mrs. Muswell, "or you'll be late."

"Oh, it only takes me three minutes, Auntie."

"A foiled, circuitous wanderer," repeated Mr. Muswell. "And for God's sake, someone, pass me the butter. How I hate these long rooms and long tables, when the butter's out of sight somewhere, in another parish. Your knife's in Brixton, and your butter's in Norwood. Come on, Belle: forward the butter. Damn the girl! Roddy, just put a trunk call through to your cousin Belle, and tell her her father is asking for the butter."

"Butter, Belle," demanded Roddy.

Belle slid the butter along to him without raising her eyes from her reading.

"Extraordinary," said Mr. Muswell, "how on a Friday morning that girl pours all her personality down into her silly feminine magazine like water draining into a sump-pit. And all the rest of you seem about as cheerful as guests at a funeral. It's always the same. I'm a hundred years older than any of you, and I'm always the only really cheerful one. I always feel especially bright at breakfast time, but what happens? I come from my bed like a bubbling mountain stream, only to be lost in bogs of gloom, and sands."

"Just what I said, Dad," declared Gilly. "I agree. What a lot!"

"Our Roddy isn't talking much." Mr. Muswell said this with some tenderness. He chose to be fond of Roddy, partly because the boy, as his nephew, treated him with more respect than did his son, and partly to annoy his wife; because he felt, and indeed sometimes proclaimed (though never in the boy's hearing) that Roddy and he were "the two unloved . . . the two outsiders . . . the two stowaways in the boat." He would say to his wife, "You love Belle and Gilly, my dear, but me and Roddy you tolerate. It's no use denying it, my dear. I can see it in the way you look at us. Belle and Gilly are your family: I—phoo!—I'm only a lodger, and so's Roddy. So's Roddy. Don't think I'm blaming you; but I just think it's a pity, a mistake, because Roddy and I are much more worthy of your love than Bill and Jelly—Jell and Billy, I mean—oh, hang it! Belle and Gilly. Of course we are. We're softer, gentler, more sensitive people. Nicier in every way."

"Roddy seems to have talked enough at Mr. Whitmore's meeting on Wednesday," said Mrs. Muswell.

Instantly a dismay leapt in the boy's eyes. Dismay and pain. His face went white. His body stayed still, but a shiver had passed through him at this hint of disapproval.

"What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Why did you make a little fool of yourself in public?"

"I didn't! What do you mean?" Absurd that a breath of criticism could hurt so!

"Hey, what's this?" asked Gilly; and even Belle glanced up from her paper.

"Mrs. Hampden told me about it yesterday. She goes to Mr. Whitmore's chapel, and it seems they had a Liberal meeting, or something, there on Wednesday night, and Roddy must needs get up and speak."

"I didn't!" Roddy's face was now red as a plum. "I just wandered in with Eddie Pope and some of the fellows for the fun of it. They belong to the Young Conservative's Association, and they wanted to visit the enemy's lines. Mr. Whitmore was speaking an awful lot of tripe about the National Government having knuckled under to the Bankers and betrayed the unemployed, and I just said they hadn't, they'd saved the country."

"Quite right, too," laughed Mr. Muswell. "Bravo, Roddy! Mrs. Hampden's a silly old sow."

"And a lot of people clapped," added Roddy. . . . "And other people were getting up and speaking."

"Well, Mrs. Hampden said it made her quite uncomfortable to hear a slip of a boy contradicting a well-educated man like Mr. Whitmore. She said it looked too ridiculous. She said people were laughing about it afterwards."

"Oh, ridiculous, was it?" sneered Roddy. But the affectation of contempt hid a shiver of shame. Of shame and disappointment. Oh, the effort it had been, in that crowded room, to amass enough courage to lift his voice and say loud words and turn all eyes to him. His limbs had trembled, his heart thumped, and his palms sweated before he could force himself to do it. And he had done it, as he knew, not because he was an ardent politician, but because he craved the applause of his friends. And he had only made a fool of himself. People were talking about him and laughing. Oh, he wanted to die. Whenever Roddy realized that he had stirred contempt or ridicule, and the shiver went through him, his mind, in a reflex action, framed the words, "Oh, I want to die." Or perhaps the automatic response would be, "Oh, I wish they were dead. I wish they were all dead."

And the strange thing was that he shivered, too, when he was praised; but this was a shiver in which, like two strands in a rope, discomfort and delight were entwined. He would recoil from praise even as he fished for it; but it didn't make him want to die; it quickened the life in him.

His Uncle Victor praised him now. "Don't you mind what the old sow says, Roddy. She's a perfect fool, and you've ten times her brains. All these old tabbies think it blasphemy to

question anything their wretched parsons say. Do her good. I think it was darned plucky of Roddy. I'm sure he said what he had to say very nicely indeed. He's got a good voice and manner—same as I always had."

"And now you're making him properly embarrassed," said Gilly. "Look at him, Belle. Look at him, Ma."

"Oh, *you* shut your face," snapped Roddy.

"And perhaps he's going to be a great politician one day," continued his Uncle Victor. "And I shouldn't be at all surprised, I may tell you. I've great hopes of our Roddy. In fact, I hope he'll do all that I've so conspicuously failed to do."

"Here, what about me?" begged Gilly. "What about me and Belle?"

"Well, if bounce can get you anywhere, you should go far. I never had enough bounce myself. That was my trouble. And I've no fears for our Belle; her head is screwed on too tight. It's a pretty head, mind you, but hard as brass, hard as brass—"

"Such rot!" scoffed Belle, tossing the brassy head.

"But Roddy's more like me. Plenty of brains, if I may say so—excellent parts—but unblessed with the bounce and push which ensure success in the market place. He has, if I mistake not, a certain recoil from such vulgar shoving. I always had. What he does in life will depend—it will depend on whether the gods are good to him. I may say the gods were always perfectly bloody to me."

"Please, Victor," reproved his wife.

"And let me add, before I bring these few remarks to a close, and if you can bear with me a little longer, that Smithson upstairs said some very nice things to me about our Roddy the other day."

"What were *they*, Pa? Let's hear. Let's make him thoroughly uncomfortable."

Roddy, his breakfast finished, was both longing to escape and longing, tense and alert, to hear what nice things had been said about him.

"He said—but I don't like to make Roddy blush—he said that he thought he was growing into—er—a most attractive boy. Those were his words. I can't lie. I never could lie. And he went further and said he had a most interesting face."

"Hurrah!" cried Gilly. "Let's see the interesting face." And he bent down and peered up into Roddy's features. "Look, Ma. Do you see the interest? Do you, Belle? Interesting, yes; but you might say the same of a gorilla, come to that. Or of a criminal. Or of the village idiot."

"I think *you're* being the idiot," said Roddy, but without

anger—with pleasure, in fact. Red to the hair-roots, he got up to escape from the room and be alone. "I must be going. I've got work to do, if you haven't. Good-bye, Auntie. Good-bye, Uncle Vic. So along, all."

"Good-bye, interesting boy," shouted Gilly after him.

III

It was nearly eight o'clock on Brixton Hill. The cool of the morning still possessed the pavements, and the shadows were long. Yesterday's litter saddened the gutters and the feet of the garden walls. The traffic streamed down the slope, but the tall houses kept their breakfast quiet, and the few shops on the opposite side had yet to take down their shutters. A philosopher might have remarked that only the cheaper people were travelling to their work on the buses, the trams and the cycles—only the labourers, errand boys, factory girls, mechanics, and small shop hands. It was a little too early for the lady typists and the neat apprentices like Belle and the well-groomed countermen like Gilly.

Roddy wheeled his cycle out of the gate and over the pavement. He threw a furtive look back at the house and then turned the head of his machine so that it faced *up* the hill instead of down the hill, where his shop lay. Swinging his leg over the saddle, he pedalled quickly out of the house's view. He was happy now and at ease. He was always happier and serener when alone, with only his dreams for companions. An audience, before whom one must appear well, was always a strain. As he forced his way up the slope he passed a man who had been at Mr. Whitmore's meeting, and for a second the humiliation quivered through him again so that his lips framed, "Oh, I only want to die," and his fingers started open and then shut tight—but it was a brief spasm, and he forgot the meeting and thought only of the secret visit he was about to pay.

After climbing the hill a little way, he slewed round and threaded his cycle into the down-flowing traffic. He eased it towards the pavement. The wheel grazed the kerb where it swept into a side road called "The Avenue."

The Avenue was a forbidden road. A board at its entrance forbade the approach of anyone without a permit from Authority. It threatened the trespasser with penalties. The Avenue was thus a very silent road because desolate. Only a single figure in blue, policeman or prison officer, waited in its far distance. It ran straight as a railway cutting between a long file of pollarded limes and (justification for the silence and the secrecy) the grey curtain wall of Brixton Prison. You could just see the gate-house of the prison and its grey halls behind. And between the

high dark curtain wall and the green limes stood the watching figure in blue.

His heart beating a little faster, Roddy dismounted and stared up the silent road. Its fascination for him was so potent that he found an eager but shameful pleasure in coming to stare at it every day. He liked to gaze at the cell windows and to imagine the prisoners pacing behind them. He hoped always to see a prison van or taxi turn into this guarded fairway, and to catch a glimpse of the captured men within. Often he wondered if other people felt this strange fascination, so darkly tinged with guilt.

His knee slung over his saddle and his elbow resting on his handle-bars, he stared: a boy quite unschooled to any knowledge of the forces moving him. He knew only that, unlike all other people, as it appeared, he could never condemn the prisoners because he seemed always to understand, from his own hidden desires, what had driven them to their crimes. He felt a curious, rather frightening, affinity with them. "There, but for the grace of God . . ." He could understand the thief, the liar, the murderer, and the sadist. Very easily (though he had never heard the term) he understood the sadist who wanted to whip the thing he loved. And despite his round childish face he could now understand, only too well, the sexual offenders: the men who were behind those barred windows for self-exposure or "gross indecency" or rape. Of course with his Brixton respectability and his uncriticizing mind he thought these crimes very shameful, but at least he understood them, and could forgive. It puckered his brow sometimes that the people all around him shouldn't understand them too. Why were they always so eager to lynch the offender? Was he, Roddy, wickedder than they? Were his temptations darker?

A prison officer, coming from the grey tenements by the prison wall, turned towards him; and immediately he flung himself on to his saddle and escaped. He forced up his speed and then let the slope do the rest. Brixton Prison was forgotten: with the buoyancy of sixteen-years-old he was now a racing motorist in a high-powered car, beating all his opponents on the track. One hand on his hip, the other most skilfully steering the giant car, he raced past the buses and the trams and the less venturesome cyclists, often punching imperiously the motor horn affixed to his upper bar. Honk, honk: honk, honk, honk, and hang you . . . out of the racer's way! He bowled into the Crossways just as the chimes of Lambeth Town Hall were introducing the hour. Flinging out an arm to delay all traffic behind, he swung round the circus and into the great shopping area. You might have supposed that he was speeding to a holiday in the country, but he was not: he was rolling like a ball into the particular little

slot where the Industrial Machine of his country demanded him. He was going into his daily cage, there to do his drudgery. Switching off his engine, thrusting forward his joy-stick (for he was now piloting a huge Handley Page bomber) he came down into the wind along a street off Atlantic Road and, taxi-ing along the tarmac, made a perfect landing. In saner words he slowed down his bicycle in front of Morton's Stores, Family Grocers and Provision Merchants. He wheeled it through the open door of a shed at the shop's side. The giant bomber was gone into its hangar. At the same moment the shop door was opened from within by Mr. Byng, the manager; and Roddy, with a child's acceptance of things as they are, walked like a good animal into the cage provided for him.

IV

WE noticed a quick guilty look on the face of Mrs. Muswell when a word of Roddy's suggested that he had been "put" to his job at Morton's Stores. That guilty look betrayed a fear which she would never admit. A fear lest she had been a mean, grasping woman who had sacrificed Roddy to her own children. She didn't want to be mean and grasping, but what could you do in these days? She did not want to think that she had sacrificed Roddy. And surely she hadn't? How could they have done other than they did? And yet it worried her sometimes to see him in his baggy and soiled flannel trousers and his old blue jacket, both too short, while Gilly and Belle walked to their work in such smart attire.

For Mrs. Muswell was not really a mean or unkind woman. Grasping she certainly was, but "mean" is too harsh a label. "Poverty-scared" fits her better: she stood on her London hill ever armed and anxious against the threats of penury and hunger that stalked her shaking, post-war world.

She had seen her husband's profession fall into dust around him. Before the war he had earned a fair income teaching the piano to young persons by day and playing in theatre orchestras at night, but since the war the orchestras had died in their pits one by one, and the young persons knocked no more at the gates of a profession that was derelict. Or, if any still learned music, they either lived in better residential districts than this decaying South London, or they went to a younger and more energetic professor than her husband. And she had watched him deteriorate as his employment dwindled. And she had had two young children to shelter and save. And she had struggled and snatched and grasped for them till she had built them a place of cover in this new inhospitable world.

They were safe now. A dozen years ago, when penury was threatening them, and gravely its anxieties on her face, she had walked down Brixton Hill, returning from her sister-in-law's home at Streatham to her own little house in Camberwell. And on Brixton Hill an idea had been born in her. She had seen the notice boards above the garden railings, "Bed and Breakfast," "Furnished Apartments"; and she had thought, "That's what I'll do." She would risk her small savings in renting one of these

large houses. She would equip its rooms with cheap second-hand furniture. She would fill the rooms with lodgers, and she would give board to such as desired it, and so scrape up a little more that way. And in such a big house as that, with a fine address, Victor might have a little music room and get some pupils again.

Effervescing with this idea, she was an excited, enthusiastic girl again. When Aldous House fell vacant she took it, though not without qualms at its size. And Victor was excited and enthusiastic too. Though no longer any good at earning money, he was excellent at all finicking and dainty and stippling little jobs, especially if they could be called artistic. His mind, though slack, was restlessly creative: it burgeoned, as a hawthorn in May, with ornate little schemes and poky little tricks. He enjoyed painting the woodwork (so long as there was not too much of it), hanging the curtains, arranging the furniture, and inventing useful gadgets with pulleys and strings. He hammered and screwed and festooned; he fitted wires and hung lights and decorated and titivated (especially in his own music room); he composed the advertisements for the *Brixton Free Press*; he designed the notice board for the gate, and himself painted it laboriously. It is odd how often a man who has no power of applying himself to a money-making task will labour for hours, happy as a boy, on some pretty-pretty, pernickety little job. And, nine times out of ten, the larger the man the tinier the job. Victor was a tall man with a huge head, and he bowed it over the minutest handiwork. He rearranged the pebbles on the drive. He clipped and prodded and pruned and trowelled in the sun—at least, till he wearied of it.

For some weeks neither the board at the gate nor the advertisements in the press had produced any lodgers. Anxiety, in these first days, was Mrs. Muswell's only boarder; he sat at the table, met her on the stairs of the big, empty house, and waited for her behind the doors of the large, cold rooms. Victor, happy in his music room, saw little of this wandering guest. But Mrs. Muswell conversed often with the guest, and one day he whispered to her the new idea. He whispered it as she was reading a letter from Leonora. An idea about Roddy.

§

Leonora was the widow of her young brother Harry. Harry had been securely, if humbly, placed in the Local Government Board (Mrs. Muswell always spoke of him proudly as "in the Civil Service") when the War called him. And he had rushed to the war. With what pleasure he had welcomed the war neither sister

nor wife ever knew. He had hardly admitted it to himself because it seemed so wicked. Wicked to welcome the slaughter of millions as a means to his own escape. But he did welcome it—welcomed it as a bride—welcomed it as a man with a reprieve. Here was escape from the tedium of a London office and the constriction of a Streatham street. Here was a way to adventure and coloured living. Now he could be Somebody. Now he could do fine deeds that perhaps would echo round the world. Perhaps he would win a Victoria Cross or be commissioned on the field. Perhaps the end of the war would find him Captain Harry Stewart or Colonel Harry Stewart, a permanent officer and a gentleman of the clubs. That the price of these chances was the risk of death weighed light in his balances—so ready for suicide, without knowing it, are the slaves of our ledgers and office stools. After training in England he was detailed for France in the spring of 1915 and given his "last leave." And on the first night of that leave, starved of his wife for months and wondering if he would ever see her again, he had caught her in unrecking arms, and the life that would be Roddy had begun to be.

It was in Mrs. Muswell's little house at Camberwell that Roddy was conceived. Leonora had no home in which to entertain her husband: she was working at a war hospital and sharing a room with another girl. And so Mrs. Muswell, even then an anxious and money-digging woman, for she had two infant children at her skirts, had suggested that Harry and Leonora should rent a "nice little bedroom" in her house for the few days of his leave.

"Of course I'd have liked to take you both for nothing, but in these days. . . . You'll understand, I know. And you are both earning money, aren't you. And it'll be much cheaper than a hotel."

And then, to ease her conscience, and not without some prurient imaginings, for Leonora was a pale, pretty girl, she had made very comfortable and alluring the nice little bedroom and the large silken bed. And there together the bewildered young couple had opened the doors to Roddy, and he had slipped quietly into life.

The leave over, and the new life created, Harry had gone to France in search of his medal and his fame. The craving for distinction proved stronger than the craving for preservation, and volunteering for every raid, he plunged once too often into no-man's-land. One morning in mid-September, to the north of La Bassee's canal, he ran crouching into a low cloud of gas that was drifting from the German cylinders on a sweet southerly breeze. He died in a Casualty Clearing Station a few days later, and as he lay dying two thoughts fought for prominence: "I shall never know now who and what my kid will be," and "Will they

perhaps give me a posthumous medal or at least mention my name as one who did well ? ”

They gave him neither medal nor mention. The only distinction that he earned was to be one of the anonymous Dead, a speck in the cloudy legion to which the nation gave the courtesy title of Our Fallen Heroes. In death, as in life, he remained anonymous in the multitude.

§

After the war Leonora had supplemented her scanty pension by taking situations as “ companion help ” with people who, in the scarcity of domestic labour, were willing to employ a war widow with a baby and to call it “ doing their bit.” In other words Leonora became a cook-general with the right to be called a lady-help. And since the houses that employed her were cheap and narrow places, where the cry or the laugh of her child pierced through every wall, worrying the masters into loud irritability, she passed from situation to situation, and her courage drooped. She had always been a frail, blonde wisp, without much force or courage.

The child was the trouble. Without him she would find very easily a haven both comfortable and secure. And hence the second idea that leapt in the anxious and scheming mind of Mrs. Muswell. She let fall to her lap a wailing letter of Leonora’s, and considered it. Why shouldn’t Roddy, now four years old, be the first of her boarders ? Yes, it was splendid. Leonora could pay for his keep with his pension of eight shillings a week, and could find him in clothes—no, she ought to pay ten shillings a week—she could easily give another two shillings from her earnings. And as he got older she would give a little more. An additional ten or twelve shillings a week would be useful. The child’s board wouldn’t really cost all that, not when she had already four mouths to feed. And he would be a nice companion for Belle who was but a year older, and for Gilly who was still only seven. And it would be a kindness to Leonora : of course it would.

That night she wrote to her sister-in-law. “ Let me take him off your hands. Let me do this for you. After all, he was my brother Harry’s child. He will have a fine house and big garden to play in, and children of his own age for companions. He can go with them to the same school. It is not good for him to be dragged from pillar to post and to make no lasting friends. Here he will have a home among his own people. And no one else of course would take him into a nice house at that figure.”

And Leonora, tired out and swayed by a stronger woman,

brought him one afternoon to that big house, and went back down the long drive, weeping a little.

Roddy's entry seemed to open the door of the house to better fortune. He proved the first of many lodgers and tenants. Soon Mrs. Muswell, a capable woman, and better mannered than many landladies, had a house none of whose rooms stood empty long. But though the money came in well, she was always afraid. A rent of over a hundred a year—rates more than half as much again—she was not used to such figures. They strained her brow, too big and restless to sit at ease in her head. And with every passing year Victor earned less and less. She decided to spend none of her money on the children's education while it could be had free from the state, but to keep it for the days when they would be learning a trade and earning nothing but pocket money. For she was determined to "put them to a trade": her longing for security insisted upon that. And so when Gilly left the elementary school, she sent him first to a secondary school, and then at sixteen apprenticed him to Vance's, the very respectable furnishers in Brixton Road. Belle at fourteen, having been one of the smartest girls in the seventh standard, went immediately as an apprentice to Poilot's, the Ladies' Hairdresser in Electric Avenue.


But what when Roddy became fourteen? Ah, here was the seed of Mrs. Muswell's guilty feeling. If she had been a generous woman, would she not have helped her sister-in-law to put Roddy to a trade too? Was he not her brother Harry's boy? But she had saved herself from seeing it like that. Belle, earning only five shillings a week in the second year of her apprenticeship, could contribute nothing to the home; Gilly was giving very little; and she couldn't, she really couldn't, take Roddy, who was not her own child, for nothing. Rather, she wanted more for him, fifteen shillings a week, now that he was tall, and eating so heartily. Very much she wanted Roddy's fifteen shillings a week. And Leonora couldn't pay that sum, and clothe him too, because the nation, having used and spent Roddy's father, declined to do any more for him, now that he was fourteen. It had bidden him rout for himself. Well, all things considered, he ought to do so. There were heaps of jobs for boys of fourteen. He could get a job of ten shillings a week, and give her eight of it, and his mother could add another seven. And she, as his auntie, would be doing all she could for him in giving him a good home.

To all of which Leonora, frightened by the stopping of the child's pension, agreed.

Oh yes, there were jobs a-plenty waiting for Roddy. The huge machine of Industry, impersonal and unmoral and unpitying, was ready to pounce upon and squeeze these fresh young coolies, so attractively cheap, now that the state had withdrawn from them

its protecting hands. "Wanted: Strong Lad able to cycle"; "Boy wanted. Good Worker"; "Wanted: Strong Willing Lad"—the shop windows beckoned to them like spiders to tender flies. Come, let us suck what we can from you while you are cheap, and then—well, if it lays waste your future, it's no business of ours. Come, good money and good prospects to a strong, willing lad. Roddy, cocky with the knowledge that as long as he was under seventeen, he was sure of a job, sold his talents as an errand boy to one shop after another, in the great shopping area at the foot of the hill.

And Mrs. Muswell, watching him, was never quite happy, never quite free from that sense of guilt. Buried deep in her mind, like a maggot in an apple, was the thought that she had used him for her own ends; that she had sacrificed her brother Harry's little boy to her own Gilly and Belle. And therefore she was sometimes impatient with him, and looked at him without love. But she was not actively hostile. She tried to be kind.



V

It was dark in the shop as Roddy entered. The blinds were still down, and the only movement that he descried in the long avenue between the counter and the wall fixtures was the retreat of Mr. Byng to the rooms behind. The glimmer of Mr. Byng's cigarette disappeared down the passage, and it was a relief to see it go. Hardly was it gone before Foster, the second assistant, came merrily in from the street. Foster, a slim lad of twenty, inspired no deference in Roddy, who usually treated him with impudence when Foster tried to order him about. But in the main Foster was a friendly young fellow, and this morning, as he hurried in two minutes late, he greeted Roddy with, "Hello, lad. Where's His Nibs?"

"Lad yourself!" retorted Roddy. "He's just gone back for a rest."

"Now then, not so much sauce! And he hasn't even troubled to pull up the blinds. Looks as if it was one of his peevish mornings. Perhaps he was tight last night. Here, I'll see to the blinds, and you out with them fruit and vegetable stands. Look snappy. Get busy. Wotcher think you're paid for?" Foster, now behind the counter, drew on his white coat and tied on his apron.

"You get on with your butter, and mind your own business."

Deliberately disobeying him, Roddy sauntered out on to the pavement to do a different job. With leisurely movements he pulled down the sunblind and hung up the wing. This was a job he always enjoyed: he enjoyed the obedience of the blind; and hanging up the wing was like hoisting a sail. Having thus provided a canopy for himself, he stood on the pavement for a minute and watched the pageant of life as it rattled by.

"Here! Come on," shouted Foster from the doorway. "Get this muck out. He'll be back any minute."

"All right. Keep your shirt on. I'm not as afraid of him as all that. If he sacks me I can find plenty of jobs as good as this one, I reckon, and better."

"That may be true for you now, but it won't be in a cuppla years, my little cockchafer. You'll talk on the other side of your mug then."

"Will I? We'll see."

"Yes, I was a damned saucy little stinker like you when I was young. But now I know you got to bum-suck your bosses if you want to get anywhere. Oh, yes! Quarrel with your dad and mum as much as you like, and with the man next door, and with the copper as well, but a man's a fool who quarrels with his bread and butter. But I suppose you're too young to see it."

"You cut that stuff out. You're not all that older than me. Only about three years."

"One can learn a hell of a lot in three years, especially in our line of business. Now come along and give us a lift with this here. But don't overwork yourself, mind; don't strain your heart, or anything. And, above all, don't rupture yourself."

"I'll see I don't."

"Betcher will."

Roddy helped him carry out the vegetable stands and the cases of oranges, and arrange them before the windows. They did not arrange the stock in them. This awaited the fingers of Mr. Byng, who would come out later and "trim up the old stock," which is to say he would bring the healthiest oranges to the surface, and brighten the faded cabbages with one or two fresh young ones. The two boys returned inside, Foster to the provision counter where he began to slice the butter and pat it into bricks and weigh it, and Roddy to the dark passage to find a broom. He brought the broom into the shop and began sweeping its floor, only to be interrupted by the breathless entry of Stan Murray.

"Hey, all!" said Stan Murray. "Here we are. To work, to work!"—a lively salute intended to veil his awareness of being late, and of having run.

Stan was really no more than the senior of two very young assistants in a small family grocer's, but he liked to refer to himself as the first provision hand, or even as the deputy manager. He was a stockier lad than Foster, and about five years older.

"Morning, all," he repeated, since they had ignored his salute. "Morning, boys."

"We open at eight," said Foster.

"Why, it's only just eight, a'nt it?"

"More like ten past. Here's Roddy and me bin at work for hours."

"Ten past my arse! It may be *two* minutes past. I give you two minutes. But where's the Byng Boy?"

"Getting rid of his breakfast, I should think. And reading the paper while he does it. And a good job for you too."

"Well, I'm glad to see you at work, boys. Here, give over that sweeping, Stewart. That'll do for to-day. That's good enough. It's time you got these fixtures filled. Make it snappy."

"Here! Who d'you think you're ordering about?"

"You, me lad. Do you good." Murray was hurrying into his white coat and apron. "Come along. Let's get 'em done before the ole bung-barrel turns up."

"Pity the pubs don't open at eight," suggested Foster. "Then we shouldn't see so much of him during the morning."

"Now then, none of that disloyalty! No disaffection, please. Loyal and obedient work, please. And remember the boy."

"Ark at him, Roddy! 'Disaffection.' Christ, where does he find these words? And he thinks a lot of himself, doesn't he. Thinks he's the bloody manager."

"That's right," agreed Roddy.

"Well, just you manage to get these fixtures filled. Just you give us some tinned fruits and pickles, instead of quite so much sauce."

"All right, all right. . . . Witty, isn't he?"

This time Roddy did as he was told. He gave the next fifteen minutes to dragging from the store above, or the cellar below, heavy loads of tinned fruits, bottled fruits, glass tongues, pickles, essences, sugar, tea, sultanas, currants and candied peel, and to stacking the canned, bottled and packed goods along the shelves, and to pouring the loose goods—the currants, candied peel, icing sugar, and loose tea—into the drawers.

He did not hurry over the work. He designed to spread it over the longest possible time. It was pleasanter work on the whole than much to which Mr. Byng might consign him: one could turn it into a game of building; one could even get an artist's joy from the arranging and patterning of the potted meats and the piling of the canned goods in pyramids. And therefore he wanted to be seen doing it, and to have plenty still to do, when Mr. Byng returned.

Otherwise Mr. Byng, who could not bear to see an errand boy standing idle, who could not bear to see the ten shillings a week wasting its power, might set him to grinding the coffee in the handmill, while he himself sat at the desk and kept an eye on the work. Or he might send him to the dark cellar below to skin cheeses, a lonely and wearisome business of peeling away with a knife the canvas covering from the fifty-six-pound cheeses. Or he might send him to the store above to unpack the fifty-six-pound bundles of paper bags, or to empty the clumsy hundredweight sacks of houndmeal, dog cakes, and chicken food into the appropriate bins. Or, most detested job of all because most monotonous

and mechanical, he might order him to cut the reams of grease-proof paper into quarter, half, and pound sizes, ready for hanging behind the provision counter. So Roddy dawdled over his fixture-filling, whistling and humming to himself and saucing Foster and Murray.

Now Mr. Byng came briskly into the shop, a small round, red man, wearing a grey alpaca coat, and tying on an apron. He went to the cash desk, which was also the office, and examined some books there, while giving now and again a supervisor's glance at Murray, Foster, and Roddy. Fortunately the first customer to enter was a garrulous woman who insisted on speaking to the manager himself, and to speaking with him long. Now, with customers Mr. Byng was never irritable, but always exceedingly, even excessively, courteous, deferential, and forbearing ; so Roddy, perceiving that his master was now the prisoner of his own politeness, seized the opportunity to escape downstairs.

The manager had come in ; the errand boy had slipped away. These things compose a fact of natural history. The natural, self-protecting urge of the errand boy is to slip from sight. Mr. Byng was by no count the worst of the managers Roddy had known ; nor was Roddy by many degrees the worst of the hundred errand boys with whom Mr. Byng had had unsatisfactory relations ; and yet Roddy had veered away from him and run down a hole like a rat from a terrier.

Mr. Byng was an impatient man ; he was in some ways a sly man ; he was inclined to leave the shop for an order round at eleven o'clock when the public houses opened ; he was known to drink deeply ; but somewhere in his round body he had a heart that was good and that he would have liked to be better. He would have liked to be loved by his boys. But unless the errand boy is a fool (which is rare in a London boy), or unless he is a saint (which is rarer still : indeed, there is no record of it), or unless the manager himself attains to sanctity (which is difficult in retail business) the conflicting interests of boy and manager are almost certain to twist the boy into the manager's slippery prey. Roddy in his first days as an errand boy had been enthusiastic. He had been proud of, and entertained by, his new job, and most anxious to please. He had dreamed of being acclaimed the world's best errand boy. In the fine flush of changing from disciplined school-boy to paid worker he had given an almost saintly devotion to his employer. He had been enthusiastic for two whole weeks—or nearly. But then, after two weeks of sweeping the shop, cleaning the cellar, heaving the cases, emptying the sacks, and pedalling or pushing, pedalling or pushing, through heat and wet and wind, behind a basket which was often too heavy for one man to lift, he had exchanged delight for disillusion, and had learned all the

tricks, which were now as instinctive as a rat's in the neighbourhood of a rat-catcher.

The simplest trick was always to slip from view. The telephone bell! Hide. It may mean a long-distance errand, and if you are nowhere in sight, they may give it to the van driver. That woman with the basket is ordering a quarter of a pound of margarine. Run to earth. The old hen may ask to have it sent, and they will say, "Certainly, madam"; but if they think you are out, they may persuade her to take it. In the rush hours there is a second boy employed. Keep below. He may be sap enough to wait in the shop, and they will toss the task to him. In the slack hours be on a round. Else there will be bales to be unpacked, crates to be opened, and sacks to be lifted on to a bench and emptied into bins.

A trick to add half an hour to your dinner time: you examine the orders that are yet to be delivered; you find one that must go to a house near your own home, and when no one is looking, you push it from sight; you deliver all the other orders in the course of the morning, but leave this one in its obscurity behind the pineapple; and at one o'clock when you are going home to dinner, you say casually, "I can take this order on my way home, see." It sounds obliging. But it takes only two minutes to deliver, and enables you to be half an hour late from dinner, because, when Mr. Byng sees you strolling in at half-past two and says, "What the hell . . ." you answer, "I bin delivering that order in Cornwall Road."

Mr. Byng had acquired instinctive tricks too. Having realized that, in the present order of the world, the relation of errand boy and manager, generally speaking, is less one of joyous co-operation than one of smouldering conflict and mutual trickery, he had adjusted himself to it, with many expressions of regret to his fellow managers, because he had a good heart, or wanted to have one; and he liked his friends to know it. You should have heard Mr. Byng on the errand boy problem, as he sat in the bar of the Prince of Wales. His disappointments and despairs were a masculine version of those bewailed by housewives when touching on the servant problem; they were, so to say, the feminine trouble in trousers. "You got to keep an eye on 'em every minute of the day. You got to keep 'em at it, or they'll be dodging work somehow. Try being soft with 'em, and they take advantage of it at once. God knows I don't want to bully the little swine; I'd like to be able to trust 'em and help 'em; but you can't, you can't. . . . No, *you* have this one on me. Two halves of bitter, please, miss. . . . You can't trust 'em to do anything unless you drive 'em to it. For the last twenty years I been advertising for a strong, willing lad, and I've never found a willing one yet, have

you? I've never found one who showed any real ambition to get on, or who had the interests of the business at heart." Mr. Byng seemed surprised, and sad, that boys wouldn't give devoted service for ten shillings a week. "And if you say a word to 'em, they walk out on you as soon as look at you. The trouble is, there are too many jobs waiting for 'em, and they know it. Yeah. . . . 'Do as little as possible, and change your job as often as possible'—that's their motto. And liars! My God! Catch 'em loafing or pinching, and they'll bluff it out to the end. I'm sorry: I should like to say a good word for 'em, but after twenty years' bitter experience I can't, and I don't think it's bin my fault, either. They're a lazy, lying, thieving lot, as a rule."

So they were. They were all that. They quickly learned from other errand boys that ten shillings a week for ten hours' labour a day, and twelve on Saturday, was nothing to bless their firms for, and that even if they dawdled through the jobs of each day, they would not only do as much as they were paid for, but do a great deal more. So they were undoubtedly lazy. And if they were reported for loafing up a side street, or wasting the firm's time in chatter with other errand boys, their denials and explanations were voluble and indignant; which is undoubtedly lying. And they quickly learned the justice of the principle (often from some old provision hand with a wife and family) that, "if they don't pay you a living wage, you're bloody well entitled to pinch whatever you can"; and they watched and smiled when the second provision hand performed a neat little trick with the carbon of his order book, making the copy void. . . . Stocktaking in these smaller shops was only once a year, so it was not difficult for a portion of the stock carried to be sunk without trace. In imitation of these smart tricks, the errand boys helped themselves to handfuls of biscuits or currants, and to tins of pineapple and boxes of preserved fruits, and accounted them part of their pay. The only brake on their pilfering was the fact that they grew sick of biscuits, pineapple, and preserved fruits. Oh yes, they were a lazy, lying, pilfering lot, and Roddy was little better than his brothers.

§

Roddy's earth was the cellar, and he ran to it now, down the greasy stairs. It was a long dark cellar, some six feet below the level of the back garden. A single and naked electric bulb illuminated the crates of bottles, the sacks of rice, the cases waiting to

be unpacked, the sawdust on the floor, and the empty boxes piled sideways against the wall to make shelves for the stock.

Here Roddy, like a stage manager, arranged some properties for a display of hard work. He rolled a case on its corners to the midst of the floor, and prized it open. Jars of jam. He did the same with another. Bars of soap. And a third. Canned goods. He pulled out some of the canned goods and stocked them in their proper recesses. With others, for a minute or two, he juggled. With the soap, for a minute or two, he built a Parthenon, the long yellow bars serving excellently for sunlit stylobate and architrave. The temple built, he demolished it and stacked the soap away.

And then, adequately surrounded by impressive evidence of work, and ready to make the noises of work when he heard the feet of Mr. Byng on the stairs, he sat on a box beneath the dim electric bulb, and drew from his pocket an American magazine of detection and adventure. And on the magic carpet of its pages he escaped away from that dim cellar into a world of adventure, violence, and murder.

The 'phone bell rent his reading. The 'phone bell—best hated sound in an errand boy's life. He heard Mr. Byng's voice at the receiver. He heard the last ting of the bell as the receiver was replaced. Then Mr. Byng talking to Foster and Murray. Then his foot on the stairs. And Roddy on his feet immediately, stacking the shelves with jars of jam.

And Mr. Byng on the last step. "Hallo, what d'you think you're doing, Stewart?"

"Unpacking these cases, Mr. Byng."

"H'm. I wonder. You're very quiet about it. I'm not quite the fool I look, you know. Well, anyhow, leave it now. Murray's back from his round, and the orders are being put up. Come along."

Roddy followed Mr. Byng up the stairs. His look was not sullen, but it was not willing. The willingness would depend on the load and on the distance. In the shop Foster was assembling a round on the grocery counter, arranging it in separate piles. When the piles were complete, Mr. Byng called over the orders, and Roddy stowed them in the deep basket with layers of brown paper between them, the first delivery resting on the top and the last lying buried at the bottom. By now the basket was an overflowing cornucopia, and Foster helped him to drag and carry it on to the pavement, and to heave it on to the trade bicycle. And Roddy mounted the bicycle, and took to the road.

He started off with some care. The bicycle would be an unhandy and top-heavy old boat till some of its cargo had been

unloaded. In the early days of his ministry he had capsized more than once, smashing bottles and eggs; and his manager, after a third fall, had docked from his wage the cost of the breakages.

However, to-day's load was less unwieldy than some, and he was glad to be out beneath the sunlight and in the freedom of the roads. The sky was a blue meadow with soft clouds pasturing across it; and it laid its benison and its healing on his capless head. A warm breeze romped in his hair. He pedalled from the trading streets into the quieter roads, and was happy to see that May, like another delivery boy, had visited them before him and discharged his load. May had defeated the dun-grey monochrome of South London, hanging the sooty trees with its young leaves so that the old houses were veiled, and lighting up the rusty gardens with lamps of lilac, laburnum, and hawthorn. The fresh young green marching with the pavements, the coloured blossom mantling the shrubs, the daffodils nodding before the basement windows sang to Roddy on his bicycle (though he heard the siren song but faintly and without distress) of freedom to be happy in green places, wandering over the sunwashed fields and through the dappled woods, and visiting every outbreak of beauty with the light improvidence of a butterfly. Perhaps the new unspotted green in the Brixton gardens touched ancestral memories, and broke their sleep, while he pedalled on behind his basket, unaware.

It was heavy pedalling just now, because his course had taken him off the flat lands and up the slope of Effra Road. After a few yards of straining he got off to walk. Ten o'clock. The campanile of Lambeth Town Hall announced the hour. Then he need not return to the shop before a quarter to eleven. Always Roddy held that three-quarters of an hour could fairly be spent on a round. And usually he spent the time in one of two ways: either he took things easily between door and door, now whistling as he made his bicycle tack along the roads like a yacht, now standing astride the machine to study a dog or other matter of interest, and now pushing it up a slope with his armpit on the saddle as if it were a crutch; or he pedalled at a fine speed, delivering his orders as rapidly as a despatch rider loaded with alarms, and then, the last task done, turned into a tranquil side-street and sat astride his bicycle and read.

To-day his duties were relieved by a pleasing peripatetic gossip with another errand boy. At ten o'clock the residential roads were sprinkled with errand boys from the big shopping area. And just as all parsons, recognising each other's uniforms, feel their fellowship and soon make contact, just as all gentlemen's gentlemen come easily together, just as all ships speak each other in passing,

so it is with errand boys : they feel the fellowship of the bicycle and the basket ; they meet and merge as freemen of the same mystery. Bicycle salutes bicycle, and it is more than probable that basket will kiss basket.

And so to-day, leaving Effra Road for Water Lane, Roddy saw and saluted another of his craft, and halted beside him to pass the time of day.

For Eddie Pope was his best friend among the errand boys. In terms of arithmetic Eddie Pope was only a few months older than he, but he was much older by maturity. He was a tall, dark youth with the greased hair of a dandy. He had the neat hips and wide chest of an athlete, and was, in fact, a fine runner and boxer and a startling, though flashy, exponent of table tennis. He possessed real self-assurance and assertiveness, unlike Roddy, whose impudences were rooted in self-distrust. Eddie Pope joked with the landladies, cheeked the charwomen, sauced his seniors, twitted the passing girls, and lorded it in a herd of boys as naturally as a young poplar puts out its leaves. And it seemed natural that so forceful a fellow should work for a grander shop than Roddy. He delivered for an imposing store in Electric Avenue, branch of a multiple company ; which company dressed him in a white coat like a surgeon's and a peaked cap like an admiral's. And he cocked the cap like a well-known admiral as he manœuvred his ship about the Brixton roads.

"What ho, Eddie ! Hallo !" Roddy saw the white coat and cap brightening the long channel of Water Lane and, flinging his leg from the saddle, he plied the brakes and slithered to Eddie's side.

He was pleased to meet Eddie, because he had persuaded himself that he and Eddie made up that couple of fast friends which was to be found in all his adventure and school stories. More, in a secret corner of his mind Roddy, full of under-educated emotional stuff that was easily turned by cheap reading into sentimentality, had tried to persuade himself that Eddie was the fulfilment of one part at least of his emotional hunger. He had a strong need to love someone, and there was no one at home who filled up this need : he had tried to love his mother, but, seeing her so seldom, he was shy and awkward in her presence and glad to get away ; he had tried to love his Uncle Vic who was always so decent with him, but Uncle Vic proved an inadequate and rather indigestible meal ; he had once, though he would never, never, have told this to anyone, tried to adore a schoolmaster at his elementary school, but the worship had perished for lack of any response ; and now the hungry tentacles were feeling for a hold on Eddie Pope.

"Hallo, Eddie."

" ' Mr. Pope ' to you, please."

"Mr. ——" Roddy parried this with an obscenity. "Where you going?"

"Best part of half way to Norwood."

"Coo!"

"Well, not so far as that, quite. But I shall have sweated a good deal before I done. You going this way?"

"Well . . . I'm going to Brixton Hill, but I could go that way."

"Daft way to go to Brixton Hill, round by Norwood. Sort of like going to Brighton by way of Birmingham. By the way, Roddy, I was playing table tennis at the club last night with a bloke called Stewart. He came with a team from Caffin's. Any relation of yours? I forgot to arst him. A hell of a slosher, he was."

"What's his other name?"

"Stinker, as far as I remember. Yes, Stinker."

"No, but what was it really?"

"Bob, I think. Bob Stewart."

"Well, he's probably one of the clan. But I don't know him."

"Oh, but now I come to think of it, he spelt the name with a 'u.' S-t-u."

"That doesn't matter. It's all the same name. There's only one Stuart clan." Roddy was propelling his bicycle with his arm-pit, by Eddie's side, as he said this.

"You kid yourself you're Scotch, don't you? Well, I never saw anyone look less Scotch in my life," pronounced Eddie, though, if asked to say what Scotchness looked like, he would have been at a loss for a reply.

"I can't help that, Mr. Pope. I *am* Scotch. My dad was in a Scottish regiment in the war. If I wore a kilt, it'd be the Royal Stuart tartan."

"Royal? Oh, you're royal, are you?"

"Well . . . the Stewarts are always known as the Royal Stewarts. But perhaps you haven't heard of Mary Stuart and Charles I and Charles II and Bonnie Prince Charlie."

"Oh yes I have. Heard of 'em before you were born. And are you descended from them?"

"In a sense, yes."

"Christ! Any chance of your ascending the throne?"

"Don't be an idiot." Roddy blushed, wondering if he had made a fool of himself. "Of course not. I never said that."

"But, by gum, you do make yourself out to be a nob! Only a few weeks ago you were explaining that the Muswells were one hell of an important family, lords of the manor, or something, and that Muswell Hill was named after them."

"Did I?" His heart was now beating rapidly. Why didn't he remember that he had said that? One should remember one's bragging tales, or one made a fool of oneself. But he hid the palpitating shame under a laugh. "Well, as a matter of fact, old cock, that's true too; though that's nothing very much to boast about. It was only some remote ancestor."

"Well, I must say it's nice to know you. It's decent of you to speak to a chap like me, a mere member of the working classes—though, to come to think of it, I'm as good as you. Better, in fact. I'm descended entirely from popes, meself."

Roddy was suffering, but he laughed. "Well, that's just impossible, old cock. Popes can't marry and have kids."

"Oh, but we were illegit., I grant you that. Love-children, we were. Bloody barsteds, in fact. Still, the blood is there, and papal blood is better than royal blood, any day."

"Oh, you can laugh at it if you like, but it happens to be true, in my case. The Stewarts are all one family, say what you like, and I never said I was descended from anyone, and it's no good your saying I did."

He had now a swelling desire to escape. To escape and be alone. To be alone, where one's dreams met with no resistance, and no one's laughter splintered them to fragments. "I had better be turning this way now. So long."

"Too-ta-loo. Are you coming out to-night?"

"I dunno. . . ." He was not sure that he loved Eddie Pope any more. "Possibly. . . ."

"Yes, come on. Let's have a Meet. Let's have a Meet outside the Prince of Wales, and go hunting, eh? You and me and Teddy Garbett and Bill Haydon, eh? I've a sort of idea I shall pick up something good to-night. And I need it: like hell I do. If I don't get a girl into my arms to-night, I shall bust. It's this here spring weather, I reckon. And we'll run down something rather nice for you too, and we'll take 'em into the Park. Coming?"

"I dunno. . . . Possibly. . . ."

"Well, we'll see you if we see you. Outside the P.O.W. About half-past seven or eight, see."

"O.K."

"Well, so long, then."

"Cheerioh."

And Roddy, much less happy now than when he first espied Eddie Pope, returned by way of Tulse Hill to Brixton Hill. He went slowly and sadly till, of a sudden, he remembered an attraction on Brixton Hill. The trials at the Old Bailey began at half-past ten or eleven, and if he got quickly to the forbidden Avenue and dallied about its entrance, he might see a prison van coming

out of the gaol, or a taxi speeding by with a couple of warders inside, guarding a handcuffed man. He bent over his handle-bars and pedalled through the curving roads as purposefully as a tiger padding to his lust.

VI

THREE miles away, somewhere in the sunshot mist that hung behind the multitudinous city on the plain, the men were completing the bridge. The massed labour of hundreds of men, throughout three years, was receiving its last touches; and the bridge, white and novel and glistening, strode across the old grey river. There between the towers of Lambeth and the towers of Westminster, where once the Britons and the Romans forded an unvalled and silvery stream between the marshes of Lambeth and the isle of Thorney, this graceful new structure now forded its dun and hurrying tide in five easy steps. Or, as its proud creators would have said, it traversed the river on five steel-arch spans, with a clear headway above Trinity high water level of three feet at the springing of the shore arches and twenty feet beneath the crown of the centre span. Its four piers were faced with Cornish granite, and their turtle-backs cut the tide as it bore downstream on its winding tour of London. Above each of the turtle-backs rose twin buttresses, curving inward, and supporting handsome panels at the level of the balustrades. And between the balustrades lay the wide deck its footpaths and carriageway still untrodden, for they were awaiting their stately nuptials, two months hence, when the King, like a father, would give them away to the eager traffic of London. The bridge, the bride, was nearly complete, and the men were gilding the cones on the obelisks that flanked its entries. The new gold threw back the sunlight. New island sites, lying like green carpets on the approach roads, diverted the traffic from these entries; and their naïve young grass, growing tall, seemed to wave and glance about as if surprised to find itself in the midst of these roaring thoroughfares. The blades seemed to be huddling together behind the white stone kerbs.

Three years of ugliness, an ugliness of dark disorder against the sky, an ugliness of clanging and jarring and shouting, had gradually congealed and condensed itself into this clean, silent, graceful shape. Men sweating beneath powerful lamps in caissons of compressed air, their blood beating in their ears, had dug in the ooze of the river bed; and as they toiled and joked and blasphemed, the caissons containing them had sunk like slow-moving lifts, through the mud, through the gravel, through the ballast, through the London blue clay, till they reached their given depths, fifty feet

below high water level, and twenty below the river bed. Every day, every minute, these toilers with their automatic spades stood upon earth which no man had ever seen before ; every day, every minute, they loaded it into skips which swung up into the ancient night above them and passed out through the air-lock into the London day ; and so every day, every minute, their floor went down, and the walls of the caisson with it ; and the compressed air kept the affronted water from breaking in beneath the caisson's cutting edge.

There were voices in those days far down beneath the tide that now swirls under Lambeth Bridge.

"Lummy, it don't half make your heart go like a blooming pneumatic drill. What did I take this job on for, mate ? Can you tell me that ?"

"Probably to get away from the missus, I should think. To leave her on t'other side of the air-lock, eh ? Can't think of any other reason why one should come dahn 'ere."

"And to think that I was fond of digging in the mud when I was a nipper ! I used to cry when they stopped me. Straight I did."

"Shouldn't gas so much, boys," said the foreman. "There's enough hot air down here without you giving us any more."

"All right, sergeant. We'll just sing out when we've found this 'ere stud that we're looking for."

And as they dug down there in the primæval slime, caressed and nursed and kept alive by the compressed air, while they sought a foundation-floor for the piers, other men, working in free air, but screened from the weight of water by heets of steel, excavated in the river banks till they unearthed a shelf for the abutments in the same blue clay.

"Hi ! Don't dig too far, chum," warned one of them, as he paused for a breath, "or you'll have the old Archbishop's palace on top of you."

"They say he gets ten thah'sand a year."

"Jesus !"

"But what I can't make out is why the Archbishop of Canterbury should have a palace in Lambeth."

"Oh, this is just his riverside bungalow. Besides, he likes to keep his eye on the Hah'ses of Parl'ament over yonder. That's partly what we pay 'im for."

And all the while, as the piers and abutments shaped themselves in mass concrete, the great ugliness reared itself against the water and the sky : stockades of timber piling to form trestles and dolphins : a network of iron girders to form a temporary and service bridge ; a file of twenty-ton cranes to lift the arch ribs and swing the cross girders ; a forest of steel bars, upright or arched, to

reinforce the concrete; barges fussing below, with the ribs for the roadway athwart them; tugs and skiffs standing by, to act as sauveteurs—and over and around it all, like locusts in tall and tangled reeds, swarmed the skilled craftsmen: welders, fitters, pile drivers, crane drivers, pump drivers, masons and carpenters and blacksmiths and decorators. And slowly, as the seasons passed over them, the winters driving the summers down the river, and as the time-sheets added up into years, their communal labour, ragged at first and raucous and jarring, and always dusty and dirty and painful, condensed into an inchaote form, and, ever narrowing and tightening, refined itself at last into this shining and slender bridge, so graceful and feminine, which strode with light steps across the river.

VII

THE afternoon, for Roddy, was a repetition of the morning. He swept out the shop again, when the doors opened after the dinner hour. Then, since Mr. Byng was not present, he stood about and exchanged repartee with Foster and Murray. It was a slack period, from two o'clock to three. At half-past two Mr. Byng reappeared, in his ordinary jacket and a bowler hat, and after consulting some books in the office with a most business-like air, passed through the shop and disappeared down the street. The public houses did not close till three. Immediately there was a general ease-up. Murray and Foster, if they did not switch off their activity, certainly slowed down its tempo. A few customers came in, and Murray and Foster were not less courteous to them, but they were certainly less brisk. Miss Hervey, at the cash desk, drew her novelette from her bag. The vanman, who had parked his little five-cwt. van against the kerb, came in and parked himself against the counter and, leaning there, enjoyed a parley with Foster and Murray and some raillery with Miss Hervey. Roddy stole down to his cellar.

But from three o'clock to seven the shop drove him hard. Afternoon deliveries were bigger than morning deliveries because they were the orders for the next day. He sweated with them under the sun. Returning to the shop, he was disheartened to find it alive with business. Women stood at the counter with their shopping lists, talking, talking; Murray, Foster, and old Byng were serving them with brisk and deferential salesmanship—all hands at work, and Mr. Byng the most unctuous of all. Other women stood waiting their turns, some talking together, some picking up tins and examining them, some dandling their babies or smacking their children and telling them to "give over." Mr. Byng floated among his public, purveying groceries and smiles and politeness, and sometimes giving a sweet to a baby or a biscuit to a child. "Won't keep you a moment, madam. . . . Thank you, madam. . . . If you please, madam." The shop was full of voices. "A pound of tea. You can send it?" "Certainly, madam. We shall be delighted to send it." "Two pounds of soda. And I should like you to send it if you will."

Oh, damn them all! Didn't this old woman realize that "send it" meant a separate journey for him? And her home was a mile away. And she had a face like a stewed rabbit.

"A pound of sugar. And could you send it for me, Mr. Byng?"

"Certainly, madam. We shall be only too pleased to send it."

Bet you will, you old red sausage.

The 'phone bell. "Excuse me a moment, madam. . . ." And Mr. Byng was answering it. "Yes, madam? . . . Certainly, madam . . . I see, I see . . . Oh yes, of course we'll send it for you."

That damned word, "send"!

"Well, that's all, Mr. Byng, thank you. Let's see: pickles, jam, sauce, tinned salmon, starch, blue, soap flakes, Rinso. . . . You'll have to send all that. I can't take all that with me."

"That's all right, madam. We'll send it."

We! We! "We" meant only him. A fat lot old Byng would do in the delivery of it.

"Thank you, madam . . . Thank you, madam . . . Thank you, Mrs. Fernside . . . Good afternoon, madam. . . ."

Aye, trade was lively; the business was flourishing; but Mr. Byng was right: Roddy hadn't the interests of the business at heart.

At five o'clock he slipped down to the cellar to have his tea in a sweet privacy. He had brought his tea in a flask, and he poured it into a mug and sipped it, after prizing open a tin and pilfering a biscuit. He sat on his box, sipping his tea and chewing his biscuit, and when these were finished, nursing his knee and indulging his reveries. But Mr. Byng bore like a police boat into the stillness of the reveries.

"What are you doing now, Stewart?"

"Well . . . I been having my tea."

"Surely you've finished it now, haven't you? It's close on half-past five."

"Yes, Mr. Byng."

"Well, don't sit there doing nothing, for God's sake. You could be packing up some soda. We want some."

"I'm an errand boy, aren't I?"

"Eh? What was that? What you say?"

"I said I thought I was an errand boy."

"Oh, did you. Did you? And what the hell do you mean by that? You get straight up and do that soda."

"I think there are some orders to deliver."

"Look here, young man, you'll think once too often, one of these days. You're not here to think; you're here to do what you're told. I'm getting about tired of you and your cheek. Any more of it, and you'll be finding yourself in the street, and that'll cool you down a bit, I reckon. And don't go giving me a look like that. I just don't care for it. It's surly and lazy boys like you that take the heart out of one. Heaven knows I don't want to be chasing

after you all day and driving you to your work—I'd like to be able to trust you—I'd like to be able to feel that you were loyal to the business and could be trusted to do your part without all this slave-driving—I'd like you to be happy with us—but what chah'nst do you give me? If I take my eyes off you for a second, you slip away somewhere and loaf. You know you do. You boys don't seem to know the meaning of the word loyalty, any of you. I can't make you out, I can't, really. Now, just you get and do that soda."

Roddy retorted no more. Slowly, sourly, he climbed the stairs to the store above the shop, and there dragged forward a hundred-weight sack of soda, and heaved it on to a stool. Lazily he fetched a supply of seven-pound bags from a bundle in the corner, and for the next half-hour he scooped the soda into the bags and made them into tidy packets. At least he did this now and again during the half-hour. There were intervals when he was otherwise engaged. At such times his hands fell to his side, his eyes stilled and became remote, and he stood quiescent for a while, and then began to pace the floor, with his head hanging down and his hands joined behind his back.

What was he doing? Do not suppose that he was unhappy as he strode to and fro with this melancholy gait. He was happy; he was as happy as he ever was, because he was lost in a secret game. The walls of the store-room with their stacked goods had fallen, and in their place were walls of lime-washed brick; the large window with its display cards of proprietary goods had shrunk into a tiny window high up and strongly barred; the wooden floor had turned to stone; and the stool that had held the soda sack had become a prisoner's stool. He was a prisoner. But no ordinary prisoner: a famous prisoner; a focus of wide public interest and no little public sympathy. People were quarrelling about him all over the country, and many were proclaiming him a hero. To the end of time they would debate his story. They would make films about him, and the greatest actors would compete for the intensely sympathetic role of Roddy Stewart. He paced his cell, to and fro, to and fro. To and fro, with hands clasped behind. To-morrow he was to die. Just think. Never again to see Uncle Vic or Auntie Alice or Gilly or Belle. Never again to see his mother: had he not said good-bye to her this morning with tenderness and dignity? Never again to see the traffic rattling down Brixton Hill: it would go rattling on to-morrow and through the years, unhalting, unheeding, unrelenting, like the stream of Time. Never again to see the blossom marching up Effra Road. He knit his brow in the effort to experience it. And for a moment he did experience it, and he realized that it could be made tolerable only by a lofty demeanour and the balm of men's praise. He must write a noble letter to the public; so

he sat down on his stool with his elbows on his knees and his fingers interlaced to compose it. Noble words, sprung from a hundred forgotten stories, paraded themselves quickly in his mind.

"In these my last moments I desire to express my gratitude to all who have believed in me and fought for me. I wish to put on record my gratitude to all the officials of this prison, from whom I have received nothing but kindness. As for those who have pursued me with their hatred, I rest happy in the assurance that one day"—no, he could do better than that—"I desire it to be known that I feel no malice towards them nor hatred in my heart. And when in the fulness of time my name is cleared before men, I wish them to know that they have my forgiveness—"

But then the fantasy changed. He was no longer innocent ; he was guilty ; but his crime was of a kind that excited sympathy rather than hate. It was forgiven him because he had loved much. In his letter to the public, which he much enjoyed composing on his stool, he wrote, "I have sinned, I confess. It is not for us men to take the law into our own hands and exercise judgment upon those who have wronged us. And it would have been nobler, I see now, to have tried to understand and to have shown mercy. But this man alienated from me the affection of the one I loved best in all the world, and in a moment of intolerable pain I shot him where he stood. And immediately after, as the public will remember, I gave myself up to the police, and threw myself upon the verdict of my countrymen. That verdict I understand and accept."

And it was the morning ; and the cell door was opening ; and they were coming in to fetch him. With dignity he rose to meet them ; with dignity he held his peace ; with dignity he offered his hands to be bound. Head high, he walked towards the door—

But just as he walked towards the door of the store-room the 'phone bell shrilled in the office below, and he returned hurriedly to his stool and his soda, lest Mr. Byng should come up the stairs to find him.

"Roddy. Roddy. Come along. Look alive."

It was Murray shouting at the foot of the stairs, and Roddy went down willingly enough, because cycling in the streets was better than packing soda, any day. In the shop he found that Murray had assembled some orders for him on the counter, and was checking them with the invoices.

"Look at 'em," said Murray, jerking his head towards Mr. Byng, who was chatting and laughing with a bowler-hatted traveller in a dark corner of the shop.

"Matey, aren't they ?" said Roddy.

"Not half. And they been gassing like that for the last half hour. And yet when that bloke comes in, old Byng shouts, 'Can't see you to-day, old boy. We're ever so busy. Sorry ;' but there's

no saying 'no' to that chap. He whips out a new line, and old Byng has half a squint at it, and there you are. The game's started. They been chin-wagging together now for half an hour, and it's been about anything but groceries most of the time. And in the meantime I'm doing the work; and it's damned well time you did some."

"Why, what do you suppose I been doing upstairs?"

"Arsing about. Or reading on the Q.T. I know you. There you are: that's the lot, and it's only to Canterbury Road and Old Lane. It shouldn't take you above ten minutes."

"I'll see that it takes twenty."

"Betcher will."

It was now six o'clock. Only another hour. Roll on, seven; roll on. Always weary by five o'clock, for he had been propelling his bicycle, lifting his sacks, heaving his cases, or just standing about, since early morning, Roddy found the last two hours of the day the most leaden-footed of all. They dragged as unwillingly as his bicycle up the slope of Herne Hill Road. Wearily he delivered this last load, and it was still only twenty past six. Forty slow minutes to go. Mr. Byng, not wishing those forty minutes to be lost, set him to fill up the fixtures which the day's sales had depleted. And every time Roddy came from the store to the shop with his burden of supplies, he glanced at the clock in the office. Half-past six. Twenty-four minutes to seven. Only twenty-four minutes, and he would be free. A quarter to seven. Only a quarter of an hour to go: nine hundred seconds. One, two, three, four—the seconds were going. They built up the minutes, and it was five to seven, and he could honestly get ready for freedom. He began. He turned down his cuffs and brushed his sleeves (happiest movements of the working day) and replaced his cycle clips and felt in his pocket for his secret reading matter—and at that moment, two minutes to seven, the 'phone bell rang.

He heard it with a mad defiance. He knew what it meant, only too well, and it laid waste his heart. Some old hag's last-minute order, which she had forgotten.

"Yes, madam," said Mr. Byng into the 'phone. "I see, madam. Certainly. Oh no, we're not closed yet. Just one minute, madam. Give me a slip of paper, Miss Hervey. Yes, madam?"

Oh, was it just down the road, or was it a mile away?

"Yes, madam, you shall have it. We shall be only too pleased to send it. We'll send it right away. Thank you, madam."

We! We!

Mr. Byng put down the receiver. "Here, make up this order, Foster. It won't take long. And Stewart, you wait. You'll have to take it before you go."

Oh, God. . . .

The order was made up, and without a word Roddy piled it into his basket. Without a word he carried the basket to the door. He dared not say a word because he was holding down his tears. He flung himself on to the bicycle and pedalled passionately. If he went fast, no one would see that his eyes had filled.

VIII

Now it was eight o'clock in the evening on Brixton Hill. And again Roddy came out of his garden. But not with his bicycle this time. He was going to hunt on foot, and he was dressed for the hunt. He wore his best grey flannel trousers, to which the cleaners, even if they had nearly bleached them, had given a crease like a knife's edge; he wore a blue jacket, and between jacket and collar a white silk scarf which he imagined looked like the white waistcoat slip worn by prosperous directors and well-dressed young financiers of the City. A silver grey cap, perched at Eddie Pope's angle, matched the flannel trousers; and with a cigarette drooping from his lips, he felt equipped for a conquest.

He was going out to hunt—but not with Eddie Pope and the other boys, because the memory of the morning's incident, when Eddie had obviously thought him silly, could still make him shiver. He preferred to hunt alone. A dream was driving him into the night: the second of the two very private aspirations that drove him through life. We have glimpsed something of both of them: a dream of winning fame and leaving an impress upon the world, and especially upon the Muswells; and a dream of having someone to love. In brief, the hunger to *be* someone, and the hunger to *have* someone. In the harbouring of these two dreams he was probably the same as everyone whose shoulder he would brush in the streets, but they were overlaid in him, over-stressed, and partly, it may be, because he had been insufficiently loved and praised as a child.

He was going out to look for the perfect girl. Though he was still some months less than seventeen, and his cheeks were still childishly round, this longing for the perfect girl was as developed in him, and as extravagantly romantic, as it might be in some lonely bachelor or disappointed married man. He always saw her as small and soft and adoring—"the most beautiful and most loving wife in Greece." And not till her breast was against his, and her soft eyes were pouring love into his, would some emptiness in him be filled, some jagged ends be closed.

All beauty spoke of her: the plane trees strewn with sunlight in the railed London gardens, the sunset lighting the terraced houses with pastel pinks and creams, the blue sky sprinkled with shreds

of white cloud at the end of the long roads, the luscious tropical scenery on the stage of the Empress Theatre, and all beautiful music—though beauty of music for him meant “Just a song at twilight” and “The Isle of Capri.”

Of course he did not really believe that he would see her to-night, or for years yet, but it was fun to wander through the streets, looking for her. He had dressed for her in case . . . but that was all part of the play, really. It was a game like the game of the prison cell, and he was happy in it.

Drowsy with the game, he stepped off the kerb to cross the road. And immediately the scream of a motor horn, and the screech of brakes! A low-built sports car had slithered to a halt within inches of him, and was now palpitating like a hurt animal.

“Good God, man! Can’t you look where you’re going? Blasted young idiot!” And the youth at the wheel gave him that look of hate which can come only from a face in a motor car. It is a remarkable fact that resentment and hate reveal their ugliness as vividly above the wheel of a motor car as anywhere in the world. In that second the everlasting Evil flashed out at Roddy from the young man’s face. It was writ there; and it could be seen as evil.

Roddy was palpitating like the car, so near had death come to him, but at the breath of condemnation his face fired, and his self-assertion swelled and burst.

“Blasted idiot yourself! Who the hell do you think you are? D’you think the road belongs to you? Dirty road-hog, that’s what you are.”

“Oh, am I?” For a moment it looked as if the youth was going to get out and knock him down.

“That’ll do, Steve,” soothed the gilded girl at his side, a polished product of the hairdresser’s, the manicurist’s, and the costumier’s. “Keep cool, old dear. Keep cool. Phew! That was a near thing, though. It sent my heart right into my mouth, and I turned quite sick.”

“I don’t wonder,” said the youth, who was almost as expensive a piece of handiwork as his companion. “The thundering fool!”

“Still, don’t get excited. He’s not worth all that.”

“Well, get out of my way, then. Blind idiot! Go on! Hop it!”

“I shan’t for you.” Roddy shot the defiance at him, standing where he was, a yard in front of the bonnet. “Not for a — like you.”

“All right then, don’t.” And the young man made as if to engage a gear and drive on.

"Look out, Steve. Steady what you're doing."

"I'm not going to be held up by *him*. If he doesn't choose to get out of my way, I'm going on, and if he gets scraped, that's *his* funeral."

"I should get some lessons in driving," advised Roddy, having found the words that would hurt most. "I suppose you're new to it. I suppose cars like that are a bit too much for you. Go on, then, and get some practice." And he stepped back on to the kerb.

The young man's lips set in a furious line, but he only let in the clutch, at which the car leapt and stalled: it was still in high gear and on the slope of a hill.

"God damn the thing!" muttered the youth, and, switching on again, and savagely thrusting into low, he ground the gears as if they were his teeth.

"There you are! I told you so," jeered Roddy. "Go and get some lessons. And sort out your gears when you get home."

"My God! For two pins I'd——"

But the girl laid her gloved hand on his. "Don't worry about him, Steve. Get on, do, or we shall have a crowd round soon."

"O.K. He's just a common street-bounder, I suppose." And he forced the car angrily up the hill.

"Good-bye," shouted Roddy after him.

And the young man, as the car zoomed out of view, was saying, "Loathsome type, that. It's type that gets my goat."

"Obviously," laughed the girl.

"I hate all louts who wear white scarves under their jackets and cock their caps on the sides of their heads. You can see they're as cocky as they make them. If they only knew what bounders they looked——"

"Oh, quite," agreed the girl.

"Can't stand 'em at any price. Peacocky little bounders."

And yet, at Epsom in June, this young man, though his cheeks were only a little less round than Roddy's, wore a man's morning coat and a pearl-grey waistcoat and a grey top hat tilted slightly back; and was glad to be seen of men.

Roddy resumed his walk across the road. He had jeered at the young man, but he was still shaking from his words of hate. And still shaking from that sudden threat of disaster. As he pictured the possible disaster, he saw himself being carried into hospital and there lying for weeks in idleness and comfort, while nurses and friends made much of him—perhaps he had rescued a child from under a car and been crushed himself. Often he encouraged

this fancy of a long but comfortable illness, with hours of reading and wool-gathering in bed, and the people asking about him in the streets. Sometimes it whispered to him to stage a faint and stir everyone's sympathy, or to go out and seek a disaster. . . . Because it had a double appeal for him, this idea of illness: it would enable him to retreat from the resistances of life, and it would give him some fame.

He was playing with it, as he walked down the other side of the road, but it was shattered by the irruption of a posse of lads, Eddie Pope leading them. All around him, suddenly, were Eddie Pope, Billy Haydon, Teddy Garbett, Jack Allen, and others. "Roddy of the Royal Stuarts," they were crying. "Roddy of the Royal Stuarts. Good evening, your majesty."

"Evening, your majesty," greeted Eddie with a bow. "Gentlemen, this is Roddy of the Royal Stuarts. Great respect, please. Back there; back! Here, Teddy, just you walk backwards in front of him. He's royal. And don't you speak before you're addressed."

"Don't be such blithering idiots," grinned Roddy, pretending amusement. It was all meant in good fun, he knew, because they liked him; but it scalded his sensitiveness, none the less. And some people on the pavement had turned to look. His cheeks flamed red as a flag. "I suppose you think it's funny, but it isn't very."

"Back there!" commanded Eddie, spreading his arms like a policeman. "This is Roddy of the Royal Stuarts. Get back, I tell you. His Majesty wishes to continue his walk. Don't you realize that you're common boys? Sorry, your highness, but you know what these rough lads are. Just low-down, common errand boys, most of 'em. I say, Teddy: he's not half blushing, is he? Like a blooming girl. D'you think he is a girl—a girl of the Blood Royal?"

"Dry up, Eddie. If you knew what an ass you looked——"

"Roddy of the Royal Stuarts. Roddy of the Royal Stuarts." The others were chanting it, as they accompanied him down the hill. Their hands in their pockets, their coats thrust back, they danced at his side. It was a royal triumph. "Bonnie Prince Roddy. Bonnie Prince Roddy."

"Yes, and he's related to the best people on his auntie's side, too," continued Eddie. "He's very well-connected, very well-connected indeed——"

"Oh, cheese it, Eddie. I never said that, or anything like it."

"Roddy of the Royal Stuarts. Bonnie Prince Roddy."

"Poor fools," commented Roddy.

And by now the demonstration was palling on the performers themselves. A little more wit, a little more shouting and dancing, and they were walking with him as friends.

"Coming for a hunt to-night, Roddy?" asked Eddie. "Coming for a——" and he winked.

"No, I can't. I—I got to go somewhere."

"Where's that?"

"Well, I—I got to go up west."

"Oh yes, of course. His Highness'd have to go up west. Park Lane, what? With a pop in at Bucken'm Palace, just to see how the old people are."

"Oh, call it off, Eddie. I got to go and see a friend of my auntie's. It's in Shepherd's Bush, if you want to know." Purposely, to prove that he was not really "sidey," he had selected a humble quarter.

"But, crikey, you said you were coming. We been waiting for you."

"I never. I said I'd see."

"Oh, well. . . ."

They were now at the Crossways; and the hunting grounds of these lads were usually on the other side of that busy circus, so Eddie, their pack leader, said, "So long" to Roddy, and the other hounds bayed likewise, and then all crossed to the broad pavement in front of the Prince of Wales, where, or near about, their victims, loitering and giggling and glancing, waited to be caught.

§

Roddy went straight on. He went straight on down Brixton Road. It was peace to be alone again, and to be able to rebuild his dream. The sickening fact that he had uttered foolish words and been publicly laughed at, and that the words could never be undone, drove him all the more surely towards the vision of the one person with whom he would be perfectly happy. He walked on and on towards Kennington, as the sunset greyed into dusk, and the lights sprang up in the long vista, and the sidelamps of the cars began to wink at him, and the buses and trams became boxes of light. Idly he threaded his way through the drifting people, and whenever he saw a likely figure ahead, with neat little hips and clicking high-heeled shoes, he hurried his step, passed to

the front of her, and turned to appraise her. Men on the pavements perceived these rapid and furtive movements and despised him for a sensual young puppy, their nostrils dilating, though they were capable of precisely the same tricks themselves. Girls, linked together, at whom he had darted his appraising glance, nudged each other and turned to look after him. Sometimes they giggled with their shoulders, and threw him an invitation with their eyes. But Roddy didn't want them, and he walked on: he was thinking less of physical than of spiritual fulfilment: he was thinking, for instance, of their old age together, he a Darby and she a Joan; of his death, holding her hand and thanking her and telling her that she had been the one perfect thing in his life; of his will which she would find and read with joy shining through sorrow: "I leave all that I possess to my beloved wife, the dearest companion, mate, and friend man ever had"; or of her death before his, and of his agony as he gazed down upon her (he drew an emotional satisfaction from the contemplation of his agony); and of the letter he would compose for the coroner: "I claim my right to go with her. I do this while of perfectly sound mind. We shared all our joys and griefs together, and we will share this"; and of the fine story the newspapers would make of it.

And yet—his brow wrinkled sometimes on his lonely walk—what was this dark streak among his desires? Why, in the midst of a love that he wanted to be compact of gentleness, did there gleam a thin vein of violence? Why did his blood lift and his body pulse with pleasure as he pictured himself punishing this soft adoring creature, taking and shaking her, and, yes, thrashing her? Why did her quiver and gasp of pain, as he whipped her, so heighten his love that he saw himself snatching her against his heart and smothering her wet face with kisses? Of course he would never do any of these wicked things, but why did their contemplation quicken his body and light up a pleasure in his throat? Strange that one could so love a person that one wanted to act thus with them. What did it mean? It beat him. All he knew was that he could understand those who did such things, and could forgive them. And therewith he tossed the twisted problem away and contemplated only those things in his magic mirror which were unflawed and unmisted.

And quietly, as the dark thickened in the long twinkling roads, and a coppery glow flushed the sky above London, he pursued his hunt; not always remembering what he was about, for sometimes his thoughts were busy with his other ambition, or they were held by the model aeroplanes in a lighted shop window, or they turned to consider some quarrelling women at a public house door. He had a drink of Cola-Cola at a brightly lit snack bar, and, buying a packet of Woodbines with an air, lit one before resuming his stroll.

Many pretty faces he saw in the illumined dark, but not one that filled up the measure of his ideal. But it was a pleasant game, wandering along through the night, and imagining that he might find her somewhere in this crowded city on the plain.

IX

DARKNESS lay upon the tall old houses and the tired old trees. They were but shadows now in the full night. A few cars raced up the slope or down it; the night-travelling lorries trundled out of London or into it; the policemen and the cats prowled along the garden walls; but all the houses were asleep behind their quiet trees. Brixton Hill had gone out like a lamp, and it would need to-morrow's sun to create it again, with its colour and movement, its diverse detail, and its manifold meaning.

But supposing Time, in a mischievous mood, and refusing allegiance to the laws we give it, were to cause the sun to rise, not on to-morrow but on a morning of a hundred years ago? Say the sun, lifting above Brixton Hill, looked down upon a day when George IV was king. Say it is a day in 1824, a hundred years and more before Roddy cycled down the hill to his shop. What does the sun see?

It looks down upon the last roll of the Surrey hills before they slope down to the plain which is embraced by the loop of the river. It sees the ridge of Brixton and its contiguous hills as the last break of a wave. Brixton Causeway runs down the slope, and the country all around is pasture and meadow, shadowed in the hollows and patched with woodland and orchard. A man on such a spring morning, if he picks his route aright, can walk along the arc of hills from Brixton to Blackheath without meeting any living creature except the rabbits in the runways and the cows on the ridge. Many farmhouses dot the fields, and there are many fine mansions guarded by trees, but they are far apart except those that lie against the Causeway or press around the other roads into London. London rises in the distant haze, a domed and steepled city, with the river twisting round its feet; and a rash of new houses, new streets, and new factories is spreading on the flats this side of the river. South London is building apace, but it will have a long way to come before it reaches the slopes of these southern hills. These, for the most part, still hold the runways of the rabbits and the nests of the larks.

And down through the mild slopes by the side of Brixton Hill, winding out of the sandy loam and down on to the clay, runs the Effra stream, prattling and sobbing over its stony bed. Cattle water in the rushes at its brink, and women from the farms stoop

over it to wash and wring out their clothes. It skirts the dotted houses of Brixton. It runs by the side of a pleasant lane called Water Lane. It swings round the cross-roads and so, winding on through the level fields, curves round a little peninsula on which stands the Watch House. From this point, strange to say, it runs cheek to cheek with the broad Brixton Road, linked to that important thoroughfare by wooden bridges which the pedestrians cross if they want to take to the fields. Reaching the close-built houses, it loses itself between brick walls and under tunnels, like a back canal in Venice, till at last, very dingy now, it empties itself into the Thames at Vauxhall Creek.

Take a good look at the Effra river, while this particular sun is up, because you will not see it when you renew your acquaintance with Roddy and his friends, unless you go down into the sewers; and it is not a stream without a history. Canute came up it, once, with his fleet of shallow-draft galleys to a place called Brixistan. And Elizabeth, that historic gadabout, came the same way in her barge, when she was in the humour to visit Sir Walter Raleigh at his house near Brixton Causeway.

As the sun, lifting, ripens the day, the traffic swells on Brixton Causeway (commonly known as Brixton Hill), and down it go the wagons and the tilt carts and the London mail coach and the gentlemen's barouches and the merchants on horseback, trotting to their offices in the City. Up it come horsemen riding for pleasure, hackney cabriolets making for the country, droves of cattle flocking to Croydon Fair, and the old Brighton Mail climbing to the toll-gate, while the guard thrills the passengers with yarns of adventure on Brixton Causeway and the Brighton Road. No doubt he points with his horn to those new grey buildings near the top of the hill, for they are already notorious. They are the new House of Correction; and as he tells the passengers with a laugh of the treadmill which they are introducing there, they turn their faces to gaze at the sombre halls.

"Twenty of 'em tread it at a time, gents, round and round, climbing a hundred thousand stairs, and yet always standing in the same place. *That* should learn 'em, I reckon. Aye, yon's the tread-wheel shed, by the mill house."

The passengers look again.

Those who go down the hill find no great shopping area at the bottom. No big stores, no arcades, no costers' barrows, and certainly no trains roaring along the high viaducts. It is all very quiet. The Prince of Wales, fronting the cross-roads, is still a country inn with martens twittering under its eaves and hops trailing over its porch. There are houses along Brixton Road, but only fields behind. Not a trace of Atlantic Road or Electric Avenue in the grass. Cows munch over the place where later

will be a grocer's cellar in which Roddy will peel cheeses and stack soap.

And so this quiet and comfortable day passes, and it grows dark again. The lamps of Brixton are lit. They are oil lamps on wooden poles, and the mischievous boys, predecessors of Eddie Pope and Roddy, have a game of kicking them out. They go from post to post, and kick them till the flames die from shock. But they keep their eyes open for the watchmen. Let them see approaching a figure in a long thick overcoat, with staff and rattle and lantern, and they cry, "Look out! A Charley!" And they run. For there is accommodation in the Watch House for two prisoners, and disorderly boys may kick their heels there, instead of the lamp-posts, for a night.

Well, like these mischievous boys, let us kick out the light we have lit and return down a hundred years. Perhaps it was a mischievous thing, seeing what our wisdom has made of Brixton Causeway and the gracious landscape around, to have recreated the past at all.

X

NATURALLY, Roddy liked his work better in summer than in winter, but, even so, the summer had its pains for an errand boy. When he pedalled through the heat, his sweat damping his shirt, he could almost believe that he preferred the cold and the rain. The hot pavements made his feet swell and burn as he pushed his bicycle up the gradients or tramped from door to door. And in the sunny afternoons it was a discipline to see the young men and girls hurrying out to their tennis, or racing in their sports-model cars to their dalliance in the country; or, if it were Saturday, the crowds in the chams-à-bancs singing their way to the sea—and he shackled to his job till seven, half-past eight, or nine!

Still, the summer had its pleasant times, when he read astride his bicycle in the shade, or lolled against it to chat with his friends; and it was undoubtedly better than the winter. In winter it was often so cold in the cellar and the store-room that he had to blow on his fingers and stamp his feet to keep them warm. And if, perhaps, he was reading in these private places, he had to huddle his shoulders up to his ears and hammer his knees together, as he sat on his box with his magazine; or he had to walk up and down with it, occasionally dancing, if he was to shake away the cold. It was cold in the shop, standing about and waiting for others, while Foster and Murray and Mr. Byng kept their blood circulating by busy service of the customers. And outside, as likely as not, it was either cold or raining, or both. To protect him from the rain, as he pedalled or pushed, he had only a jumble-sale mackintosh and a pair of thin gaiters; so that, by dinner time, his flannel trousers were often soaked through, and his shirt and undervest wet with the rain that had trickled down his neck. At home during the dinner hour he would dry himself in front of the fire, and, removing his sodden boots, amuse himself making patterns on the linoleum with his wet socks. Back at work in the same wet clothes, he would lift his sacks and bend over his crates, and the damp parts would press coldly on his skin. Their touch, by a powerful piece of hypnotism, would make him sneeze and shiver, and he would dance in his garments to shake them away from his skin. The clothes dried on him in time, but in the evening at home they felt shrunken and stiff, and then he would study

them in the mirror, and, seeing his cuffs above his wrists and his trousers above his ankles, he would grumble about his job to Mrs. Muswell and declare that he wasn't going on with it; but she would beg him to "stick to it if you can, Roddy. Every job in this world has its hardships and discomforts. Heaven knows *I* have to work hard enough, and in all weathers. Sometimes, I am sure, I feel ready to drop, and I wonder if I can go on with it. You stick to your job is what *I* say, Roddy. Money isn't easy to come by in these days; don't you believe it"; because instantly the dread had visited her that he might find no other employment and be thrown on her charity.

Nevertheless, her conscience pricked her as she looked at his thin waterproof, and she went out and bought him a new one. It was still a second-hand one, and cheap—much cheaper than anything she would have bought for Gilly—but she persuaded herself that it was sound. And, having given it to him, though not without a reminder that it was strictly his mother's part to provide his clothes, she felt happier.

Near the turn of the year he became seventeen, and the more the months convinced him that he was seventeen, the less happy he felt at being still a "strong lad able to cycle"; and the more indignant he became with old Byng for giving him only twelve-and-six a week. Why, he knew errand boys of sixteen who were getting their fifteen shillings; and Eddie Pope had been getting seventeen shillings from his chain store, before he left for something better. So did the wound fester that he went to Mr. Byng and asked for another half a crown rise. Mr. Byng refused, but not unkindly; rather he was voluble in explaining how he'd like to give his boys fifteen shillings, but it just wasn't possible.

"I only wish I could, my boy. I've a lot of sympathy with what you say; I have, really. But there it is: the boss is always getting at me to cut down my overheads, and he wouldn't fall for fifteen bob for an errand boy. That's the position fair and square."

And because he spoke kindly Roddy did not answer rudely. He did not answer at all: he walked away with a heavy heart. At home that night he felt humiliated and depressed. He saw Gilly and Belle as happy young people in secure occupations: Gilly, a junior salesman now, with thirty-five shillings a week, and Belle an improver, with twenty. And he? He who was so keen on surpassing them! Did he look like doing it at this rate?

Uncle Vic would often support him in his desire for a better job; and this would make Mrs. Muswell very angry indeed. "He does nothing himself," she would complain to Gilly and

Belle, as she moved from stove to sink, "and then he encourages the boy to lose his job, just as if *I* shouldn't have to slave to make good the loss. It's little enough *he'd* do to help. I can't see *him* doing much to keep the child. I imagine he'd like him to be as idle as himself."

"I suppose the old boy can't get any work if he can't," suggested Gilly, who was fond of his father in a disrespectful way.

"That's right. Take his part against me." She wiped her hands angrily on a cloth and tossed it aside. "Just as if I hadn't done everything for you and Belle. I'd like to know where you two'd be if I hadn't set to and made a home for you, and saved and scraped to put you into good jobs. It's little enough *he's* done. But one gets no thanks in this world, ever."

"Oh, hell!" sighed Gilly. "Belle, my darling, I been and gone and said the wrong thing. I've stirred up trouble."

"It makes me wonder if it's worth while going on slaving for you all, without a word of thanks. Everybody just taking it for granted!"

"Sh! It's coming," whispered Gilly to his sister. "Two-pence to a farthing that it comes."

"There's you and Belle working for a few hours a day in clean and comfortable jobs, where you can wear nice clothes and meet interesting people, and being free to go where you like at night. There's *him* sitting in his music room all day, doing God knows what, and sauntering out at night to God knows where." She was pouring hot water into her washing-up basin, and its steam made a fine background to her mounting anger. "Do you think *I* wouldn't like to wear nice clothes and see people sometimes instead of spending my life in a kitchen? Do you think *I* shouldn't like to go out of an evening sometimes. Do you think *I* wouldn't like to idle all day in a music room? Do you think I don't feel worn out sometimes, cooking for three different sets of people, catering for everyone's likes and dislikes, carrying trays up and down stairs, and cleaning up after that woman, who's next to no good at all? Working, working, working, morning, noon, and night! I tell you I often think it's not worth going on with. I feel I'm ready to put my head in the gas oven, and be done with it."

"There! I told you so!" murmured Gilly. "Now we've torn it. Sorry, Ma. But we try to help a bit, don't we, Belle? Come on, I'll give you a lift now. I'll wipe up for you, see."

§

Uncle Vic certainly spent most of the day in his music room. No sooner had he finished breakfast or dinner than he rose and, after lighting his pipe, drifted as inconspicuously as possible from the room, and footed it as quickly as he could along the passage. His door closed.

The theory was that he composed music in his little room, but whether anyone accepted the theory is another matter. True, there were sheets of scribbled music paper on his little square table. True, if he were discovered asleep in the one easy chair, there was a sheet of music paper on his lap. True that, if Roddy walked too quickly into the room, he would often see his uncle writing at the table and driving his fingers through his thickets of grey hair, his brow so knit with thought that it was plain he was composing *something*; but why did he hasten to slide a sheet of music paper over his manuscript? It was a frightened and stealthy action, no doubt about that; but Roddy couldn't bring himself to condemn it, because he remembered that *he* too often was stealthy and sly. True that, for hours on end, the sounds of music, usually wistful and wandering, but sometimes a high thunder, would come from the little upright piano in the music room, but these probably meant no more than that Uncle Vic was happy giving vague musical shape to the vague, aimless pageant of his thoughts. The pathos which he expressed in whimsical words at the breakfast table he loved to translate into sighing or smiling music at his piano. He liked to discuss with "this one firm friend" all his defeats and disappointments, all his uncreated hopes, and all his aims which had missed the mark.

That once or twice in his life he had not wholly missed the mark was shown by the rows of press-cuttings pinned on the inside of a cupboard door. They were old press-cuttings, most of them, browning and curling, but they recorded times when he had "earned great applause for his rendering of Chopin's *Revolutionary Etude* at a concert in Camberwell," or when one of his songs (still unpublished) had been sung at a Conservative smoker, or when "his accompanying of the artistes had contributed greatly to the success of the evening." A whole row of cuttings kept alive the memory of his nearest approach to the gate of fame: the performance "with conspicuous success" of his only light opera, *One Springtime in Venice* (which he still hoped to get published, and perhaps filmed) by local amateurs in a parish hall. Sometimes Roddy, rushing into the music room, would see Uncle

Vic standing by the open cupboard door and reading again these encouraging records.

Of course Uncle Vic did not blame himself for his inadequate earnings and fame, unless it were blame to disavow the possession of any gifts for hustle, jostle, bounce, and push. No artist may distrust his own talent, and live. He blamed the war, and the world which it had left in its wake. A vulgar world, a jazzing world, where no real music could find a hearing. "And that one talent which is death to hide, lodged with me useless," he would bewail, either to the family or to the piano, "though my soul more bent to serve therewith my Maker . . ." Or, wiping his mouth with his table napkin and then resting hand and napkin on the table, he would remind the family, "Before the war, children, I had my pupils all over Camberwell and Peckham and Kennington and Vauxhall. I had, you may say, an excellent milk round. I carried the pure milk of music into the homes of the people at half a crown an hour—half a crown a pint, as you might say—or thirty shillings for a term of twelve lessons—which, as far as I can see, is a reduction of precisely nothing for those who took a quantity. Why, your mother herself was one of my customers, and one of the prettiest, be it known. The milk round produced as much as twenty shillings a day sometimes; am I not right, dear? But now—bah!—no one wants the pure article any more; they neither want to hear it nor to learn it—they only want the tinned substance which a Public Utility Corporation issues to them *ad libitum* and *ad nauseam* for ten shillings a year. Ah yes, Roddy, you still have your round to go on, but mine—mine is a thing of the past. It is among the things that have been. I am nothing . . . nothing any more. A foiled, circuitous wanderer, till at last the longed-for dash of waves is heard . . ."

Considering all these sorrows, it was astonishing the high spirits he brought to the breakfast table. Never was Gilly more jocund than he, when the family sat around for an audience. He would come into the room (after the audience was in its seats) smacking and rubbing his hands to show his high fettle, and explaining to them all, "His strength was as the strength of ten, Because his heart was pure"; and, sitting down and picking up his table napkin, he would say, "Silence, all! I think I am going to make a joke," at which Gilly would demur, "Oh, hell!" and when Belle and his wife stayed silent through the meal, he would chide them, "You've no gaiety, no zest, no gusto. You're old before your time. God forbid that I should boast or brag or be puffed up with pride, but, despite the outrageous buffetings which have been my lot in life, and despite my grey hairs and advancing years, I feel, I may say, about fourteen this morning"; and at the end of the meal, pushing back his chair and filling his pipe,

he would exclaim, " Ah, what a beautiful thing in a wicked world is a pipe ! It is no substitute for the love of one's family ; it is no substitute for the applause of men ; but it is something . . . definitely something. It allays the ache of the unloved, and the pain of the neglected and despised ; " and then, the pipe filled and glimmering, he would rise and say, " Well, to work, to work ! " and ease towards the door, somewhat dubiously, like an old sheep dog who longs for, but is ashamed to admit it, his basket by the kitchen fire.

§

Undoubtedly Uncle Vic had creative power, even if he had done nothing with it. When he recreated his past for them, as he loved to do, he played his own original light upon it, and it was a magic light. He could compose in words as well as in musical notes. Sometimes on winter evenings, when supper was cleared away, and they sat round the fire, the whole family would listen to his prattle with charmed attention because of that magic. He would tell of the days when he and their mother were young, and lived by Camberwell Green. Bygone Camberwell rose before them, and along its streets a shock-headed teacher of music courted the prettiest of his pupils. Roddy leaned forward and listened with staring eyes ; Gilly shed all his facetiousness and sat in silent receptiveness, his sheep's eyes larger than ever behind their magnifying lenses ; and even Belle, though examining her polished nails at times or lifting her embroidery to the lamp, was fascinated by the tale. And Mrs. Muswell, darning socks or mending a vest, would think on his words, a little sadly. All saw again the horse-trams and the horse-buses plying between Camberwell Green and Blackfriars, and the cable trams that went rattle, rattle, rattle along Brixton Road, and the so-called " fast " trains of the London, Chatham and Dover line, grunting along the viaducts " to Peckham Rye, Nunhead, and the Palace," while young Mr. Muswell looked out of the window of a more sluggish train, and admired and envied them. They saw again the celebrated actresses and music hall artistes, whole families of them, sometimes, who lodged or lived in Brixton, their fame somewhat faded now, and went shopping in its streets, pointed out by the passers-by. He rehearsed their names—Fanny Broome, Marie Fondal, Gladys Astley, Mabel Joy, Greta Clementi, and old John Poole—and by the magic of his feeling for them he made them sound like a necklace of old gold ornaments.

And not celebrities only.

"Do you remember, my dear, our first old landlady—that was before we had a house of our own, children—a dear old Miss Fosdick who had been governess to General Sir Redvers Buller, and was for ever telling us tales of little Redvers? She was a little wizened old thing, and spent most of her existence *epi to topo*—you don't know what that means, and a good job, too—and she was too feeble to shoot the bolt, so I was always bursting in on her, seated in state, and the shock to her modesty was terrible. I've no doubt it acted like a purgative."

"Really, Victor!"

"And do you remember Mr. Montefiore, the fish frier, and how, when we were hungry of an evening, I used to sneak out to his shop near the railway bridge and buy 'a pennorth of each,' and how Mr. Montefiore's pennorths in those days were so liberal that there was enough for both? Things were fun in those days, weren't they? Yes, your mother was quite fond of me in those days, children. Strange, and very sad, very sad, how quickly the frail flower of love drops its petals—the flower fadeth, the grass withereth, and man goes to his long home, and the mourners go about the streets . . . And do you remember the multiple murderer in the Wyndham Road? The murders were done in a public house, Roddy, and I doubled round there, to stand and gaze up at the windows and wonder behind which of them the deeds were done. The place was all boarded up, I remember, and the long street seemed very quiet . . ."

One evening they were seated thus, listening to him. He was leaning back in one easy chair; Gilly was lounging in the other; Roddy leaned forward on a stiff chair; Belle had coiled herself round a footstool before the smouldering fire; and Mrs. Muswell sat beside her work-basket at the dining table; and the lamp by which she sewed was the only light in the long room. Uncle Vic, his eyes sparkling and his fingers often running through his shrubs of grey hair, was painting the long, green vista of Brixton Road as he had known it in the time of its prosperity.

"Our Brixton Hill was grand, my children, but Brixton Road was grander. I remember it as a long perspective curving away between green trees—miles long, it seemed, and as level as the life of an honest man . . . and as flat. It ran all the way from Camberwell New Road to the foot of Brixton Hill——"

"It still does, Daddy," suggested Belle.

"Yes . . . yes, it certainly does . . . but how differently, how differently, my witty child! Then the tall houses behind its trees were the most respectable villas in the world—houses much

like this mansion of ours before, alas, its splendour faded. The gardens were full of chestnuts and sycamores and limes—the trees are still there, but so dark and withered!—and the virginia creepers, all crimson and red in the autumn, hung down over the porches and the windows like the tresses of the Magdalen, weeping for her sins. They never seem to blush so red now . . . And as you strolled along, you could see the gardeners sweeping up the dead leaves, and perhaps a coachman washing the wheels of a brougham. You won't believe it, I know, but I heard a nightingale in Brixton Road one evening in May. It was a beautiful mile of road, and so quiet you could imagine yourself twenty miles from Westminster instead of two. A residential calm brooded over it. It was the very symbol and sanctuary of middle class comfort, and I say there's nothing more pleasant to contemplate than the comfort of the well-to-do. All my life I've wanted to achieve it but, as you may see if you look around this ghastly room, the Gods in their wisdom——"

"Never mind about the Gods," interrupted Gilly. "Let's have more about Brixton Road."

"Nay, but look once around, look once around. *Si monumentum requiris circumspice* . . . Sunday morning was the time to drink the essence of Brixton Road. I used to stroll along it alone, because this was before I met your dear mother—no, not quite alone, for all the way there walked with me the smell of Sunday Dinner, a gracious companion. And I would see the ladies returning from St. Matthew's Church in their silks and bombazines, and rustling up their garden paths to their roast beef and cauliflower; and perhaps if I glanced through a window I would see the local infant, poor, wretched child, saying the family grace with folded hands. Grace said, they rustled down into their chairs, and dissected the sermon with the joint, and discussed how the Archdeacon had drawled the Litany, and how that silly Mrs. Bannerman had fainted half way through, and how poor Major Molyneux had bungled the collection as usual——"

As he said that, the bell rang.

"Someone at the door, Ma," said Gilly.

"Damn!" muttered Uncle Vic, annoyed to have his narration spoiled.

"Who can it be at this hour?" asked Mrs. Muswell, her brows knit. "Run and see who it is, Belle."

With a shrug Belle obeyed.

Uncle Vic sighed, and filled his pipe. "A foiled, circuitous wanderer . . ." he said.

It was Eddie Pope. Eddie Pope came into the room, looking very smart in a new grey suit from the Fifty Shilling Tailors, and holding a new Homburg hat in his hand. His shoes were polished

into a full red mahogany, and his dark hair greased like an advertisement for a hairdresser's cream. He looked very much the young man who was finding his place in the world.

"Evening, Mr. Muswell. Evening, Mrs. Muswell. Very comfortable you all look. Hallo, Gilly. Hallo, Roddy. Roddy, I've got you a new job. Yes, I have! And it's a good job too."

"Eh, what's this?" asked Uncle Vic; and Mrs. Muswell looked startled, as if she didn't want him unsettling Roddy.

"Smart, isn't he?" exclaimed Gilly, his large, bespectacled eyes turned like headlamps on the fine clothes.

"You close down, Gilly. You're no dandy, are you? Oh, no. Roddy, I'm determined you're going to have this new job." Plainly he was both pleased to be helping Roddy, and pleased to be a man of influence who found jobs for his friends.

"Where is it? Where is it?" demanded Roddy.

"At my new place in Brixton Road."

"Well now!" Uncle Vic addressed a question to all. "Isn't that strange? I was just telling them about Brixton Road, Eddie. I must have known sub-consciously that you were coming in—yes, I've always thought that I was psychic. Sit down; sit down."

"And which shop are you at now, Eddie?" asked Mrs. Muswell.

"At Paget and Lamb's. And it's a good place too. On the whole I like it better than any other place I been in. I'm second grocery hand there now. It's not such a big place as Sanderson's, but it's all the more friendly for that, and it does quite as good a class of business. Better, in fact. And the manager's a gentleman—a silly old squirt sometimes, but he tries to be decent to the boys. And everything in the place is of the latest, I can tell you. Absolutely the latest." For his own credit he must praise the gift he was bringing to Roddy. "It's the place for Roddy. Morton's is no cop. He's worth something better than that."

"But what's the job that's going?" asked Roddy.

"Only errand boy at the moment, but that's not the point. I happen to know—yes, I happen to know—" and indeed he looked very knowing, winking at them all, and even dropping his voice as if confiding a secret—"that the junior grocery hand is quitting very soon—this is strictly on the Q.T., of course—and I'm dead sure Roddy'll be able to walk into his place. It's only this morning that I heard old Cottrell, the manager, would be wanting an errand boy, and did I go straight to him and mention Roddy? You bet I did? I said I knew the very chap for him. I said you were much too good for the job you were in, a gentleman, and all that—oh, I laid it on thick, you bet—and I don't mind telling you he was impressed. He's inclined to trust me, I may say. And he said, Oh well, if he's all that, tell him to come along and see me: don't let's miss any jewellery that's going free. And have

I run all the way here, with hardly any supper? Just about. I'm keen, really keen, on Roddy getting this job." Excitement and pleasure radiated from his face. Two-thirds of the pleasure were pride in his power, but the remaining third was a genuine joy in helping a friend.

Roddy was touched. This affection and praise pierced to his deepest need. "It was awfully decent of you Eddie. I say, thanks awfully!"

"And I think, if you arst me, that he'll give you a quid a week. I'm not sure of that, mind you, but anyhow you'll get that, and more, when you go behind the counter. And they're an awfully nice set of chaps, especially a bloke called Pete Berry, who drives the van. Extraordinary chap, Pete! Clever, real clever: wants to be a parson or something, and learns Greek at night and I-don't-know-what-all—I mean, a really educated fellow. I can't make out what he's saying half the time, he uses such long words, but he's really an awfully decent sort, and you'd never know he was religious, because he's a sport. Between ourselves, he's taken me out sometimes on the van, and *drive*?—Coo! I don't mind telling you he can drive like the devil. He misses crashes by a split hair, but he can drive; there's no mistaking he can drive."

Immediately this praise of Pete Berry stirred a jealousy in Roddy.

"And all the other chaps are nice guys too. In fact, it's only a good class of chap they have there. Old Cottrell won't have anything else. And that's why I thought at once of Roddy."

"Crums! I'll go and see him to-morrow," affirmed Roddy. "A quid a week! Coo! Gummy, I'd like to tell that to old Byng."

"Right. That's settled," said Eddie.

"Do be careful before you do anything rash," put in Mrs. Muswell.

"Oh, nonsense, Ma," objected Gilly. "Don't be so timid. I know Paget and Lamb's well—about half-way along Brixton Road—and it's a good shop. I should say it's a darned good proposition for our Roddy."

"Certainly. Certainly," agreed Uncle Vic. "I hope it'll be the beginning of better things for him. And it's very kind of Eddie."

"Not at all, not at all." All such praise Eddie waved away grandly.

"Well, if there's really an opening, of course, but one wants to be sure first . . ."

"You needn't worry, Mrs. Muswell," Eddie assured her. "Old Cottrell's only got to look at Roddy to take him on, I'm sure: especially after all I've said. I mean, I as good as fixed it up with him. You come and see him in the morning, Roddy. You

can't mistake old Cottrell, because the funny thing is he's rather like an old cockerel with a long beak, and all. Mention my name. Say you're the chap I recommended, see."

"You bet I will, Eddie. Thanks awfully. Ta."

"O.K. That's nothing, old boy."

XI

NEXT morning Roddy arrived at Morton's in his best clothes, which was a cause of wit in Foster and Murray. This he parried with insolence, but he was hardly thinking of them: he was impatient to be sent out with his first batch of orders. These were soon stowed on his bicycle; and he mounted, and turned the whole lot towards Brixton Road. He was going to do his own business first. With a heart pumping like a one-stroke engine he pedalled down the broad, sweeping vista which his uncle had described so picturesquely last night.

Brixton Road was very different now from Uncle Vic's picture. It was a tide of traffic pouring round the pitching trams and the lumbering buses. Gaunt houses, grown grey and melancholy with indigence, peered over their tattered gardens at the endless train of vehicles on the broad, sweeping way. Shops and commercial premises, on the other hand, were for the most part as fresh and active as the old genteel residences were down-at-heel. They stood like perky and prosperous commercial gentlemen chattering to a company of half-pay colonels, shabby and gaunt.

Roddy cycled some yards beyond Paget and Lamb's so that he could consider the shop as he passed. Then he stood his cycle against the kerb, removed his trouser clips, shook his clothes into a comely shape, and walked back towards the shop. And the nearer he came to it the faster went the one-stroke engine. That wide shop-front of most modern design, all black glass panels and chromium plate! That huge name in steel lettering on the black fascia, PAGET AND LAMB, all ready to burst at dusk into red neon lighting! That dainty and stylish window-dressing, so different from the mass of tins and cartons in Morton's old-fashioned window! Paget and Lamb's overawed him. It beat back his diffidence as a cliff resists the creeping wave. And he felt sad that he could be so overawed. This shaking of the limbs suggested that he would never be able to impress himself upon the world. How could he hope to be a master among men, how could he dream of being a leader, a dictator, an emperor even, if all imposing buildings over-awed him and made him want to escape?

He refused to be overawed. Calling up his will-power, he walked into Paget and Lamb's. A large, spacious shop; provision counter,

wine counter, grocery counter, and despatch counter; two smart young ladies at the cash desk; five assistants in spotless white coats and aprons, Eddie among them, cutting and packing and serving; shining cash registers, automatic scales, bacon machine, and electric coffee machine—but get control of your limbs, and clear your throat, even if your heart is behaving like an independent thing. Nothing shall overawe you. Go on. That must be Mr. Cottrell in the grey alpaca coat and white apron, talking to the fat woman. Yes, he was rather like a plucked cockerel, as Eddie had said. He had a long bird-like nose, and a long thin neck with a bobbing adam's-apple, and a chickeny skin. On the bridge of the long nose rested steel spectacles over which he stared as he talked to his customer.

Roddy waited behind some customers, and once he caught the eye of Eddie, which winked. But now Mr. Cottrell was free and walking towards the back of the shop, so Roddy slipped after him and came up with him at the end of the wine counter.

"Excuse me, sir . . ."

"Eh? Hallo?" Mr. Cottrell swung round and studied Roddy over the top of his spectacles. "What is it, sonny?"

"I heard from Mr. Pope that you were wanting a new errand boy . . ."

"Oh yes. Oh, you're the young fellow, are you? Yes, Mr. Pope did say something about you, but you don't look seventeen. Well, you're prompt, at any rate."

Roddy smiled back into the eyes which were considering him, and knew by a kind of telepathy, as one does in tense moments, that Mr. Cottrell was liking the look of him.

"Well, come along," continued Mr. Cottrell, walking into a corner beside the cash desk. "We can be quiet here. Where are you working now?"

"At Morton's Stores, near the Crossways."

"Yes, I know it. And what are you getting there?"

"I'm—I'm only getting fifteen shillings at present, but I'm hoping to get a rise soon." All the boys, when bargaining for a job, exaggerated their present wage.

"And you think you're worth a lot more, I suppose?" A smile twinkled at Roddy over the spectacles.

"Well, of course I should like a little more if I could get it."

"And what exactly do you think you're worth?"

"I—I was hoping I might get a pound a week."

"Oh no, we couldn't give you that. No." Mr. Cottrell suddenly became fluent: as fluent as Mr. Byng. No, he'd like to give his boys a good round pound a week, but it couldn't be done. Personally he thought it none too much for a likely lad of seventeen, but he was only the manager, and the boss wouldn't stand for it.

Roddy must understand that he could get a boy fresh from school for ten shillings—not that he cared much for these raw kids: they were too unreliable; he liked a nice, steady, good class of lad. No, he was sorry, very sorry, but seventeen shillings was the outside he could offer, but there were prospects of something better if Roddy satisfied him, and they got on well together. Why a pound a week, or so, was all the junior provision hand was getting—not that he didn't wish the lad was earning more, but—

It was plain that Mr. Cottrell resembled Mr. Byng in wanting to be liked by his hands, and to be thought a kindly employer. But it was plain also that he really was made of a kinder, pleasanter, less inflammable stuff than Mr. Byng. His eyes, staring over the steel rims, detected a disappointment in Roddy's face, and after a moment or two of thought he smiled and said, "Well, look here, my boy, how's this? I'm inclined to think you'd do. You're a presentable lad, and you look keen enough. And Eddie Pope spoke well of you. Let's say seventeen and six, and we'll pay all your insurance, eh? I bet they docked it from your wages at Morton's, didn't they?"

"Well yes, Mr. Cottrell, they did . . ."

"Well, you know I don't think that's a bad offer. And you'll like it here. You've your friend Eddie here, and the others are nice boys. We're quite a happy family. You can help Pete on the van sometimes—Pete Berry, that is, my vanman and a particularly good chap. That's him at the despatch counter now. A very steady fellow, and a good influence on you young ones. What do you say to it?"

"Thank you very much, Mr. Cottrell. I should like to come."

"Well, we can see how you get on, can't we? And you can come on Monday? Good. Eight-thirty sharp then—and I can't stop now. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, Mr. Cottrell. And thank you very much."

Roddy, passing back through the shop, winked the result to Eddie, who signalled his pleasure with an upward thrust of both his thumbs. And Roddy went out into the Brixton Road. And the sunlight in the long road ran to meet a brightness in his heart! Seventeen and six a week and the chance of being made an assistant! Coo! There were wings to his feet as he pedalled back along Brixton Road to talk to Foster and Murray.

§

Paget and Lamb's made Morton's Stores seem very poor tea indeed. Two days at Paget and Lamb's, and Roddy was pitying

Morton's and all who worked there. He was still humiliated by his job in the world, but he was happier at Paget and Lamb's than at any other shop he had served: probably happier than he knew. He was still the boy-of-all-work, sweeping out the shop, filling the fixtures, cleaning the windows, and delivering the orders, but it was an attractive shop to clean and furnish, and both in the shop and on his bicycle he now wore a khaki warehouse coat of which he was as proud, in the first days, as of a uniform. Moreover all the roads of his new circuit were *flat*: Paget and Lamb's stood a mile from the hills. And in Mr. Cottrell Paget and Lamb's had a manager who, though more capable of exasperations than he had seemed on their first interview, was more consistently kind to his staff than Mr. Byng. He was paternal: he liked to call them Eddie and Pete, and Rosie and Jean. And though he would sacrifice Roddy to any lady customer at seven o'clock in the evening as fluently and flatteringly as Mr. Byng, he always apologised to the boy volubly, called him Roddy, and patted him on the shoulder. He really liked his new boy, and would sometimes, when clearing out stock, hand him a box of fruits, a tin of sweets, or a bottle of ginger wine. He praised generously and often. And Roddy, for a little time, wondered if he could love Mr. Cottrell like a father.

Roddy was happy in his friends at Paget and Lamb's. He and Eddie and Pete were now banded into a trio; and though he believed himself destined to a greater fame than either of them, his rooted diffidence, and fear of being left out, made him grateful to them for accepting him as an equal partner.

Peter Berry, with his smiling but vague and concealing eyes, was something of a mystery to both Eddie and Roddy. He was a tall young man, too tall for his shoulders, which sloped a little, and for his chin, which receded a little, and for his wrists, which were slender as a girl's. But there was nothing weak about his thin, bony wrists: they could master Eddie's thick forearms, and force them back in play, while his eyes smiled benevolently and his teeth set a little cruelly. He was obviously vain about his muscles; and Eddie knew that he exercised them nightly in the privacy of his bedroom with spring dumb-bells and an elastic developer. (It is probable that this hidden and anxious effort to give himself a breadth that would match his length had developed his muscles rather than his frame.) He was not less of a dandy than the other boys, and his dark hair was always greased right back from his white brow.

But the most unaccountable thing about him was his eyes. They were large and black and well-fringed: they were Mediterranean eyes at the top of a lanky English body; and always they smiled enigmatically, as if they were not keeping step with his words, but following a different track. And often the skin about his eyes

was creased with lines of strain, as if there were doubts and conflicts behind them.

"Can't make His Reverence out sometimes," complained Eddie to Roddy. "You never quite know whether he's getting at you or not. His words seem to be saying one thing, and his darned grin another. Or else he isn't hearing you at all. A queer guy. Too clever."

They called him "His Reverence" or "Worthy," because of the astounding fact, which he did not attempt to conceal, but rather displayed, that he taught in a Sunday School, studied the Greek Testament every night (or said he did), and talked of raising enough money to go to a Theological College and become a parson. After such professions he could neither bet, swear, tell smutty stories, or go chasing after girls at night, but, as Eddie had said, he was an extraordinarily good sport for a religious guy. He only smiled when they called him "Reverence" or "Worthy" and he larked like the others with the crane behind the shop and with the sacks in the store-room. He played oughts-and-crosses behind the counter on paper bags (sometimes causing complaints from officious old women who liked to get employees into trouble) and bowls or bagatelle along the floor with the Dutch cheeses. And, best of all, he would take the boys for illicit drives in the van, and, smiling grimly, excite them by his illicit speed. So desperately did he drive at times that you might have thought he was trying to escape from something. Himself, maybe.

He was always kind, always doing good turns, either because his religion truly impelled him to them or because, in the language of the trade, his window-display must match his advertisements. If he saw Roddy toiling along with a heavy cycle, he would stop his van and, without a word said, take his orders aboard, and Roddy and the cycle too, and deliver them for him. He would help him in cellar and store with his sacks and cases and crates. And quite often (though generally in view of the other assistants) he would help him sweep out the shop.

He liked to have Roddy in the van as an audience before whom he could display his driving. And one evening, when spring was gilding the streets, and Roddy and he had completed their deliveries in a double-quick time, he said sharply, "Let's go for a drive along the esplanade. Come on! Shall we?" And his dark eyes flashed mischief—and doubt.

"Along the *where*?" inquired Roddy.

"Along the sea-front, my son."

"I suppose you mean something, but I don't know what it is."

"O.K. I'll soon show you. Along the sea-wall of South London. The sea-wall, where she stands, for miles and miles, and stares at her Mother City. Come along, Florrie"; and he

pressed on the accelerator, bent over his wheel, and pretended that Florrie, the van, was a racing car on the salt flats of Utah. "She's a beauty, isn't she?" he murmured joyously, as the Morris-ten-hundredweight van, this year's model, clean and green and shining, moaned and twisted along Brixton Road, with its two sportsmen at the wheel in their khaki warehouse coats.

"I say, steady, Worthyl" cautioned Roddy.

"Oh, I shan't hit anything. I've never hit anything yet." And he turned out of Brixton Road and round Kennington Park into Kennington Road.

"Let's go round the old Oval," suggested Roddy.

"No, that leads nowhere. That only leads into Vauxhall, and Vauxhall's as dull as a ditch. No good thing can come out of Vauxhall, as Nathaniel said of Nazareth. *Ek Nazaret dunatai ti agathon einai* is the Greek for it, if you want to know. Clever, aren't I? No, you leave things to me. I know where I'm going."

And he sped along Kennington Road and swung into Lambeth Road. Till now the roads had been flat—flat as the plains of Utah—but now, ever so slightly, the broad Lambeth Road began to tilt.

"That's because we're coming to the Bridge," Pete explained.

"What bridge?"

"Crikey!" He seemed astonished at the question. "You'll see. You'll soon see."

They sped past the terraced houses, past the wall of the Archbishop's Park, past the graveyard of Lambeth Church, and so came to the crossways where Lambeth Road meets the Albert Embankment and the entrance to Lambeth Bridge. And the great view stood before them.

"Oh, wait, wait!" cried Roddy.

Pete threw out his clutch, dragged up his brake, and stopped the van with a jerk. "Kind of thought it'd get you," he said.

They were looking at one of the grandest, or at least one of the most imposing, pictures London can show. Immediately before them rose the golden-crested obelisks of the new bridge, and they seemed like twin obelisks flanking the carriageway to the towered city across the river. There, across the water, was the pinnacled façade of the Houses of Parliament, with Big Ben at one end and the Victoria Tower at the other. The towers of Westminster Abbey lifted behind the embankment trees. On this side of the river, to the left of Roddy and Pete, stood the old Tudor gatehouse and battlemented towers of the Archbishop's palace, and the old grey tower of Lambeth Church. And on the farther side, at the end of the bridge, like three sister cliffs, stood the three blocks of Thames House and Imperial Chemical Industries House, three proud white homes of Commerce. Wildrose and golden fumes burned above

the sun's bed in the western sky, and all the proud city everywhere was drenched with evening light.

"Golly!" cried Roddy. "I say, Worthy!" And he added softly, "It makes you proud of England, doesn't it?"

"You're right," agreed Pete. "But have you never been here before?"

"Not that I know of."

"You mean to say this is the first time you've seen Lambeth Bridge?"

"Yes, I'm certain of that."

"Well, it's only a year old, that's true. I used to stand and watch it being built almost every day for three years. I could always stand for hours and watch any sort of building when I was a kid. It seemed to help me dream my dreams."

"What dreams, Pete?"

"Oh, I don't know. . . . Dreams of doing something great and making a tremendous name for myself, or of loving someone for ever and ever. Of Pete Berry, the immortal, you see, or of Mrs. Pete Berry, the inconceivably lovely and loving and adorable. . . . Or of being a saint and devoting my life to the world in some stinking back street, and even becoming a martyr and dying gloriously, with nobody knowing it but God. I was a funny, lonely little swine. Always I could wander for hours alone."

"Let's go on to the bridge. Gosh, you must have been quite a lot like me, old Pete, except that I've never wanted to be a martyr, not unless the world praised me for it."

"Don't know that I really did, either. But one's never so happy as when one's alone and planning fine things for oneself. At least, I know I've never been."

They were approaching the crown of the bridge, and Roddy, lifting his eyes to Pete's dark eyes, saw that they were gazing down the reach of the river, but without sight, as if his soul were gazing down a much longer river towards the faraway Islands of the Blest. And in that moment Roddy wondered very secretly if he could love this Pete as he longed to love someone, and make of him the perfect partner and friend. The hidden life behind Pete's dark, straining eyes had been revealed to him for a second, and seen to be so like his own.

"Behold, he stood by the river," quoted Pete. "Who? Who was it? I forget. But he dreamed some damned silly dreams. . . . Yes. . . . 'I stood on the bridge at midnight. . . .'"

They had come to the crown of the bridge, and, climbing its cast-iron balustrade, they hung themselves by their elbows on the parapet and looked northward up Lambeth Reach. For some time Roddy said nothing: he just gazed. He drank in the scene. He saw the moored barges lying like huddled animals asleep on

the water under the Archbishop's wall. He watched a tug scissoring through the rippled sheet of water and dipping its funnel as it passed under their span. He turned to see the flotsam tossing over the wash of the passing tug and then drifting down the ebbing tide. He stared at the distant Westminster Bridge, which the tiny red buses were crossing as smoothly and silently as toys at the end of a shooting gallery. And he followed the bend of the river beyond the bridge, with the massive and clear-cut buildings rearing themselves like hills beside it, and blushing a pale pink beneath the glance of the evening sun.

And he breathed forth two words like a lyric. "Mighty London!"

From Roddy came no judgment of his city for the part it had allotted to him, but only the pride of a son.

XII

AFTER some months, as Eddie had foretold, one of the junior assistants left to get married and join his father-in-law's business. And Roddy became a counter hand. Mr. Cottrell, proposing the work over the top of his spectacles, said, "We'll start you at a pound a week, and see how you get on, see;" and all that day Roddy was impatient to get home and publish his promotion to the Muswells. And a few mornings later he donned his white coat and apron, and the shop laughed. "That's cut you all out," said Mr. Niven, the first provision hand. "You're right there: none of the girls'll come to this counter now," said Jack Hornby, the man on the wine counter. "This should double our custom," said Eddie Pope, slapping his hands with glee at the future prospects of the shop. "He looks a lot like Gary Cooper, doesn't he?" said Arnold Carr, putting his head on one side to study him. "Does he always blush like that?" asked Pete. And even Mr. Cottrell, who had been smiling at these exchanges over the top of his spectacles, said, "Brixton Road is looking up." And at the dinner-hour that day, as Roddy walked into the store at the back to make ready for the street, he heard a rushing of feet behind him, and a medley of voices and laughter, and, even as he turned his head, he was set upon by four young men, Eddie, Pete, Jack and Arnold, who tripped him up, brought him to the ground, and rolled him, virgin white coat and all, in the sawdust and the dirt. It was his christening as a counter hand.

He performed his new duties with the pleasure of a child playing a new game. What secret pleasure it gave him to ape the ways of Mr. Cottrell and Mr. Niven, and to speak the traditional lines of his part! "Can I help you, madam? . . . No, I'm afraid I'm out of that brand at the moment, sir. . . . Certainly, madam, we shall be delighted to send it for you. . . . Here, Jimmy, look alive! Here's a batch of orders waiting to go out. . . . Here, Jimmy, old son, I'll give you a lift with that load. It's a bit heavy, isn't it?"

There were moments of embarrassment, though, when his rawness stood revealed to a customer. "One moment, madam: I'll inquire. What's the price of this tea now, Mr. Pope? . . . Excuse me, Mr. Cottrell, but what—what exactly is the price of Epicure

Sauce? . . . Have we—have we this in medium size, Mr. Niven? Yes, madam, we have: just one moment, please . . .” Or when he discovered that a trick had been practised on him by the other lads behind the counter. Let a customer, well known for her garrulity and indecision, approach the counter, and they sidled away to sudden tasks, leaving her to him, or they even had the impudence to pass her along to him like a packet of soap. “Yes, madam, if you will inquire of that young gentleman there. . . . Grocery, Mr. Stewart! . . . Mr. Stewart, this lady, please.” And when at length he escaped from the net of her chatter and vacillation, he turned on them and snorted. “Your humour is of a singularly puerile kind,” a phrase which he had borrowed from Uncle Vic. But even when snorting thus, he was happy in his new white coat and apron, and in his smart repartee, and turned with pride to serve the next customer.

He had a small round now in the streets off Brixton Road. About ten o'clock he would resume his ordinary jacket, put his book in his pocket, mount his own cycle—no longer the “trade bike” with its painted name—and ride round and collect his orders with the aplomb of a commercial traveller. As he rode he pitied the errand boys on their trade bikes. His pencil sat behind his ear, and his book peeped above his breast pocket, to tell any errand boys of his acquaintance that he was collecting orders now instead of delivering them. But he had to take the chaff of the landladies, or of their slatternly maids, when first he appeared at their doors with a book instead of a basket. “My! Quite the gentleman now, aren't you? Gone up in the world, eh?” At which he blushed and shifted his glance away, and murmured deprecatingly, “Not very far.”

§

Not very far. Not into any place where the horizons were large, and the roads to one's desires could be seen, and the soul felt exultant and free. This new employment might be better than the old: it might yield some fun and make-believe, and offer some sops to one's pride; but it was still, in the main, a wearisome business, done for livelihood and not for love. This drudging for a wage, ten hours a day, did not fit the reality of these boys: it did not enable them to come alive. In the daytime they sought to come alive by illicit games or by mutual cozening, which satisfied their hunger for fun and excitement and creation. In such moments they were *real*. Their hunger for adventure was real,

and their hunger for a work that was creative instead of repetitive, and their longing to love and be loved. Little sustenance for these behind a counter, during the ten bright hours of the day! But what of the night? They went seeking them at night. They found them in cinemas, adventuring in spirit down the wild or lovely landscapes of the screen, or shaping their waggish comments and tossing them into the darkness and earning a laugh, or fingering the knees of the girls at their sides. They took them, excitement and some creation, from the hands of the street bookie. They found something, something of what they desired, in the music halls. The beauty chorus danced on to the stage to bring it to them. Twelve of "the loveliest girls in London," naked except for pink bandages that only heightened the power of their nakedness, step-danced before them in simultaneous movement, shaking their buttocks, swinging their legs, revealing in turn their fronts, their backs, their sides, and their frilly forks; and then, at least, these boys were quick with life, though not without shame. After such a show Roddy and Eddie, in the darkness of the street, would tease Pete, saying, "Old Worthy stared at those little cuties much too steadily, don't you think? We mustn't take him there again"; but Pete only smiled mysteriously, and when they went again, he was with them. And then they discovered the Ring. Roddy and Eddie discovered the old Ring by Blackfriars Bridge. The daily monotony of their lives had sent them towards a violent excitement indeed.

It was a new excitement for these two. They thought themselves knowing ones, but they had to admit that all-in wrestling was "a new one on them"; though neither admitted that it was also rather a shock. Oddly enough it was no new thing to Pete. The first time Roddy and Eddie decided to sample the entertainment at the Ring, they agreed together, two solemn young owls, that they wouldn't say anything about it to Old Worthy. It was a meat too raw for Worthy. They went when the bills announced, "Benn Feldman, the Sensation from Soho, v. Wolf Gratten, the Merseyside Terror," and the statement ran among the fans that Wolf was "the dirtiest fighter in the game." They crushed in with the crowd, leapt up to the octagonal gallery which surrounded the floodlit ring, and from its front seats watched the richer patrons filing into the ringside seats below. And suddenly, to their astonishment, to their delight, to their loud laughter, Pete entered alone, examining his ticket and searching for his seat. He went to a four-and-sixpenny ringside seat and sat there, unsmiling now, strained about the eyes, and withdrawn into himself.

"Well, I'm——"

"The dirty old dog! The bad old man!"

And since many in the hall were shouting to their pals as they

came in, they shouted down to Pete, "Hallo, Worthy! So this is where you spend your evenings!"

He looked up. He strained to distinguish them. He recognized them and, for a second, seemed disturbed. Then he smiled to cover his discomfort, and waved his programme.

When the wrestling began it seemed to Roddy so brutal, such an exhibition of torture, that he must look again and again at Pete to see how it affected him. Pete was watching it with a strained gaze, moving his head this way and that, to miss nothing.

In the interval when Eddie and Roddy went out with the crowd for a draught of night air, and stood within the white light of the powerful electric lamps, Pete sauntered up to them to explain.

"It interests me, I confess. It's a most curious social phenomenon. Rather like the old Roman gladiators."

"Oh, that's what you come for, is it?" laughed Eddie. "It's part of his theological studies, Rod."

"No . . ." Pete turned his eyes and looked down the long Blackfriars Bridge Road. "No, it's not that . . . it's . . . and, besides its social interest, there's a terrific amount of skill in it, and to watch a perfect technique always gives you an æsthetic delight, no matter what the art. And considered merely as animals, the men are superb creatures. I get a lot of æsthetic pleasure from it, I admit."

"Hell, what's he talking about, Rod? Is it theology?"

"Talking a lot of tripe. Have you been often, Worthy?"

"No. Not often. . . ."

"Do you understand it? I mean, the rules, and all that."

"Oh, yes, yes." Few can resist being the expert, and Pete was not one of them.

"Well, I can't. Seems to me they're trying to murder each other, and that's all."

"Oh, the murder hasn't begun yet. Wait till the Wolf gets going. If he fights clean after the first few minutes, it'll be the first time I've ever seen him do it. You should have seen him at the Whitechapel Pavilion against Dave Morgan. My heavens!"

"Crums, Roddy! I believe he goes to all the wrestling places in London. Whenever the Wolf is billed, he goes to see the dirty work. There's more in old Pete than meets the eye. Why have you never told us anything about it, Worthy?"

"Why should I? I didn't imagine you'd be interested. It's not as important as all that. I happen to be interested in it as an extraordinary phenomenon of our rather violent and hopeless world. The behaviour of the crowd interests me almost more than the wrestling: I like observing human nature. I sit and

wonder what it means, and what it'll all lead to. It's all extraordinarily reminiscent of Ancient Rome and the decay of a civilization which was rotten and cracking and ready to collapse. There's a kind of beauty of decay about it, I think."

"Clever fellow, isn't he, Rod?"

§

After that night Pete, playing the expert, went always to the Ring with his little class of two pupils and, sitting between them in their cheap seats, exhibited his specialist knowledge. He explained the rules, interpreted the art, acclaimed the skill, and descanted at length on the social significance of it all. But Roddy, let Pete justify their studies as he might, could never shake off a sense of guilt when he went to the Ring. His yielding to its strange allure had a little, a very little, of the shame that depressed him when he yielded to the craving of his body. Why was it so thrilling to witness stunning blows and angry punishment, to see a man enduring torment till he hammered on the floor for mercy, to crave for the "dirty fighting" to begin, and then to surf-ride on waves of mob rage? He revelled in the high excitement when the audience rose like a crowd of lynchers and yelled their fury—though, as he could well see, this maddened and savage fighting was the stuff they demanded, paid for, and were resolved to have. They paid the "dirty fighter" to give them the righteous joy of yelling their indignation at him. And he gave it them. Their mighty, massed roar was a tribute to him, all upside down and inside out, and as much more exciting than honest applause as lust is more exciting than love.

It is Thursday, and a spring evening in South London; and Roddy, Eddie, Pete, and Gilly are hurrying along the New Cut towards the Ring. Roddy is pleased to be bringing Gilly, because for once he is the more sophisticated person who has seen things which Gilly has not seen, and can explain them learnedly to him. As they turn the curve of the Cut they see the Ring before them, because it fronts the mouth of that broad market road. It is a polygonal building of yellow brick, with a roof like an umbrella whose ribs ascend to a small cupola. It looks exactly suited for a boxing and wrestling saloon: in fact, it looks like a huge circus tent to which an enchanter has given the solidity of brick and stone.

It was built to the glory of God. It was once a chapel. None of the youths and men now approaching its doors, none of those standing in its queues with caps on the backs of their heads and

cigarettes dangling, knows this, but, once told, a man can believe it: he can see the old chapel in the arched windows and in the little cupola like a belfry and in the park-like railings that guard its forecourt. He can believe that it was built for a popular preacher on the green Surrey flats a hundred and fifty years ago, and that the carriages of the fashionable came over Blackfriars Bridge and stopped by the gate in those railings to discharge the elegant worshippers, who were come to hear a celebrated choir and to weigh the worth of a belauded preacher. He can believe that through its doors passed Sheridan and Southey, Wilberforce and Wellington and Nelson, and sometimes a royal prince. Grave and godly then its outward garb; but how rakish now! How rakish and winking, with its ribbon running round its cornice, "England's Premier Boxing Arena," and its bright electric globes, and its wooden shanties that do duty for box office and vestibule, and its photographs of wrestlers in the windows, and its flaring red and yellow bills, "The Match of the Season. By Special Request of our numerous Patrons. Book for the fight of Fights. No limits! To a finish! International Heavyweight Wrestling Contest of the Year. Wolf Gratten v. Hans Ulfborg." And the congregation assembling now—how different from the quiet ladies in poke bonnets and the serious gentlemen in peg-top trousers and chimney hats!

Our four boys see the congregation beginning to file in, and they quicken their pace, feeling for their tickets. They pass through the doors, bound up the steps to the gallery, and rush down to their seats in the front row. Here seated, they rest their elbows on the parapet and watch, Roddy expounding everything to Gilly.

The dimly lit interior appears to be circular, but it is polygonal. Its centre and focus is the floodlit ring, with its white mat, taut ropes, and padded posts. The audience is pouring through the doors like mincemeat out of a mincing machine; its atoms diverge and jostle and crab-walk to their seats, amid shouting and whistling and catcalls. There is a racket of feet on vibrating boards, a rumourous fabric of chatter and coughing, a glimmering of cigarettes and pipe bowls, and above it all a lifting cloud of smoke and heat. Dust motes, dispersed in a panic, float and fly like midges through the powerful rays directed downward on the ring. And around that white light there is a gradation into darkness.

The old preacher, proud of his chapel, used to say that he liked it circular because then the devil couldn't skulk in any corners; but is it possible that, in the chapel as it is to-day, His lively Majesty dances in the centre of the floor? Soon the huge dim vat is full. Slopes of faces rise from the white-lit ring; the

hanging galleries are baskets of faces; the standing room is a round fence of faces; a voice threads its way among the faces and the glowing cigarettes, among the flaming matches and the fluttering programmes: "Any apples wanted? . . . Apples, gents? . . . Programmes. . . ."

Our four boys lean forward in the gallery that they may swim on the waves of fun. And the fun consists in shouting humorous hallos to your friends (or to remarkable strangers), in whistling enviously when a lad brings in a girl (for girls in the audience are rare enough to deserve a greeting and the sound of kisses), and in cheering Mr. Rackham, the promoter, as he steps in for a moment to glance at the house.

"Good evening, Mr. Rackham. . . . Good evening, sir. . . . Evening, Mr. Rackham, sir. . . ."

"Evening, boys."

"Good money here to-night, Mr. Rackham. Meat for your dinner to-morrow."

Which Mr. Rackham acknowledges with a genial wave as he turns back to his office.

See, an enormous man in a sports coat is pushing through some standing people towards the gangway and the dressing-rooms. It is Hustling Jack Berridge, a popular wrestler, a clean fighter, a gentleman of the mat.

"Good old Jack!"

"H'are you, Jack?"

"Good evening, Mr. Berridge."

Enter in his mustard brown suit Wolf Gratten himself. The house rises to him. It rises with an uproar of boos and hisses and satirical songs. "Boo-oo-oo . . . Tssssss . . . Dirty old Gratten. Poor old Gratten. . . ." All in unison: "*Poor . . . old . . . Gratten.*" And they give him the dicky bird whistle, which signifies the noise that will sing in his head when he is knocked out by Hans Ulfborg, the brawny Dane. "Never mind, we got the ambulance for you, Mr. Gratten. Is your missus insured? . . . Gee, he'll make a fat corpse, won't he? . . . Nah! He'll be all right after six months in hospital."

And yet is there not some amused affection in the jeers? This is the man they really want, and the boos that accompany him down the gangway are really a greater triumph than the cheers for clean Jack Berridge.

"Any apples wanted? . . . Any gentleman want a programme?"

"There's an apple for yer!" A lad is leading to her seat a peroxidized girl.

"Gee, there's a juicy one!"

"Hi, bring her up here, mate. It's dark up here."

"Yes, you can do what you like up here. It's 'all-in' to-night, chum."

"Any apples wanted, gentlemen?"

"No, he's got a peach."

Often it is Eddie or Roddy who calls out a witticism. Pete is inclined to look on and grin. To Gilly everything is strange. Eddie does it more naturally than Roddy because he is less self-conscious, but Roddy strains to rival him, driven by his desire for public appreciation—and by his desire to impress Gilly. Sure that he can do as well as Eddie, he will stay silent while he builds up a witty comment and amasses the courage to shout it, and when the courage is there, and the moment awaits it, he tosses his quip into the darkness, though the publicity heats his cheeks and shakes his heart. The people laugh. And heady as champagne is the people's appreciation. It is his first sip of public applause. Thus the Ring ministers both to his thirst for thrilling life and to his thirst for self-display.

Cheering and clapping and hammering of feet. Sam Iles, the M.C., a tiny little man in a natty evening dress, leaps into the ring and is holding up his hand for silence. But he doesn't get it.

"Good evening, Mr. Iles."

"Evening, Sam."

"We 'elped to pay for that suit."

"Gahn! It's not his; it's only hired."

"Is that a real shirt, Sam, or a dickey?"

"Won't be much left of it by the time Wolf's done with it."

In his appeal for silence the little man passes the flat of his hand all round the house, as if he were the old preacher blessing his congregation. To be sure, he is the old minister's successor, in the new cult.

"Gentlemen——"

"That's us," cries Eddie. Laughter and cheers—a long laugh, giving time to Roddy.

"Gentlemen——"

"Can't see any from here." This is Roddy, and the crowd, ready to laugh at anything, gives him his reward, though Gilly, still a nervous stranger, protests, "*Shut* up, Roddy!" But there is a giggle in his anxious protest which is as good as praise.

"Gentlemen. Forty minutes lightweight contest between Babe Benson, of Kennington, and Patsy Streat, of Vauxhall." He points to the two wrestlers who are now within the ropes and standing at their corners. "Both local lads. Two falls out of three."

Cheers for Fred Welby, the referee, a lithe, dark man, in grey trousers and vest, who has leapt on to the mat. He is nimble and sleek as a fawn. He needs to be nimble if he is to slip from the

wrath of the wrestlers and dodge being kicked in the breast, hurled down and stamped upon, picked up and slung out of the ring, or seized by the hair and swung round and round like a ball on a string. Swiftly he runs his hands down the stripped bodies of the wrestlers. No oil on their limbs; no sand hidden anywhere to rub in the opponent's eyes; no ground glass under the rubber-soled pumps.

"That'll do, Fred."

"Don't be too hard on 'em, Fred. This isn't a Sunday School."

"Yeah. Let 'em enjoy themselves."

"Right away, boys."

The early contests are good-tempered and clean. The big scenes, the tumults, the mob furies await a later hour. Wolf Gratten and Hans Ulfborg, hottest dish of the evening, will not be served up till after the interval. Nothing sensational in these early bouts. At least, nothing sensational to all-in wrestling fans. To others they might seem remarkable enough. Two men kicking, twisting, bashing, and stunning each other; two men practising locks and throws hitherto banned from all mats—full nelsons, hammer locks, and kidney squeezes; two men swinging each other like sledge-hammers and smashing each other on to the ringing floor; two men inflicting such pain on each other (or pretending to) as will induce an agonized submission; two men grunting, crouching, panting, gasping, spitting, and, when in a lock, slapping the mat and gnashing their teeth with pain (real or feigned); but nothing sensational so far.

It is all clean fighting. They have honoured the rules: they have refrained from gouging, biting, scratching, hair pulling, ear twisting, finger wrenching, deliberately breaking a limb, or strangling. The rules explicitly forbid these. Roddy and his friends enjoy it; they appreciate its skill and fairness; but they are longing for the really rough stuff to come.

Probably their greatest enjoyment is in the witty remarks yelled by themselves and others. Patsy and the Babe have been rolling on the floor too long, and the crowd, tired of this quiet groundwork, cries for more spectacular effects. The jeers fly.

"What's up, Patsy? Joined a monastery?"

"Mind you don't hurt him, Babe. Kiss him, I should."

"S'truth! I can do better than that with my missus."

"Gahn! My old woman does twice as good as that with me."

"Stop puffin', Patsy. Aren't you comfortable?"

"Lor! Get up. Kick the old ref. out, and go for 'im."

And now Roddy is ready with one. Patsy is prone on the mat, and the Babe astride him, backwards, working a twist of his feet.

Patsy cannot move. So Roddy cries, "Have a little nap, Patsy"; and his public roars with delight. Gilly is astounded. He is nothing but second fiddle to Roddy to-night.

After the lightweights a heavyweight bout: Big Wally Harding and Basher Layton. Wally is a popular turn because he has recently appeared in a film and so become a butt for new raillery. Basher Layton slips off his blue dressing-gown, and immediately waves of laughter beat against the ring, for he is seen to be as fat and pink as a giant sow. His breasts protrude like a woman's, and his paunch is round as a balloon. He holds up leg-of-mutton arms that the referee may stroke his massive thighs.

"Gahn! It's not a referee he wants, it's a midwife."

"Where's your brassière, Mr. Layton?"

"Anybody lost a whale?"

"What time's milking time, Basher?"

"Good old Night Starvation. Lam into him, Wally."

The tussle is joined. And Basher, who is as agile as he is fat, a mountain skipping like a ram, throws Big Wally face downward to the ground; though Wally breaks the shock of his fall with his hands. Basher flings himself on to his back and attempts a full Nelson, while Big Wally, the film star, grimaces with pain and gasps and spits.

"Don't spoil his face, Basher. Greta wants it."

"Look out, Wally. The camera man's here. Smile."

"Mind out, Basher. You're hurting poor Wally."

"Get up, Wally; you're wanted on the phone."

"Get up, Wally. Let's see the other side of you. We're tired of this side."

And Roddy: "Have a fag, Wally, while you're waiting."

The communal laugh is all that he can desire; and it is certain that Gilly's laugh was a part of it.

Suddenly by a marvellous *souplesse*—most difficult and spectacular throw in the wrestler's bag—Big Wally, eluding the lock, finds his feet and the waist of his opponent, lifts high the mountainous man, flings himself backwards to the mat, and throws Basher beside him so that his back hits the floor like a steam-hammer—then swings himself on to the upturned belly.

"Gaw! Mind the twins."

Wally is struggling to prevent Basher making a bridge of his body; and Roddy in the mounting excitement has had time to improve on the last jest. "Here! Mind his Infant Welfare Centre," he yells; and Eddie, a-bubble with joy, sounds the same note, "Steady, Wally! It's not hygienic"; but Roddy doesn't hear him, because he is repeating his own remark and relishing

again the laughter it aroused ; while Eddie, half rising to his feet, shouts, " Gosh, he's done it, he's done it, he's done it ! " for the referee has counted three, and Big Wally has scored a fall.

§

It is the interval, and the crowd flocks out into the velvety and glittering night. Here, like a radio-active substance, it breaks up and shoots its particles towards the pubs of the Blackfriars Bridge Road. Eddie, Pete, Roddy and Gilly are content to stand beneath the brilliant white lights of the forecourt and smoke their fags. They still feel only boys, and do not easily go into pubs. They rock on their heels and knock ash from their fags as they watch the diminished traffic of the night carrying its lamps towards the river.

And only a little to the north of them, running along the brink of the river, is a street called Bankside. They know it well, but it means nothing to them to-night. They do not recall, for they have never known, that the district called Bankside was the home of the round playhouses where Shakespeare and Burbage and Tarlton played, or, more significant still, to those who stand beneath the lights of the Ring, that the gardens of Bankside held the octagonal theatres where the dogs baited the bulls and the bears. They see no kinship between themselves and the Tudor apprentices who, hurrying to a bear-baiting in the pleasure gardens south of the river, took the watermen's ferryboats to Bankside stairs. They do not think that the Ring is the bear garden alive again, except that now, instead of baiting bears with dogs, they bait men with men.

Pete knows well enough that off Bankside there is a brief alley of factories and warehouses called Bear Gardens, but the only thing he can tell you about it is that it smells of coffee and tea. The tea-packers and coffee roasters are there, and sometimes he has come to their doors with his van to collect an undelivered load. But he has never given a thought to the name, nor pondered on the winds of Time, which, blowing along the river, have displaced the stench of dogs and bears, and brought to the transfigured gardens a smell of coffee and tea.

§

The interval is at an end, and the four lads toss down their fag-ends and slouch back into the arena.

Another bout of lightweights, but this is only the aperitif before the big dish ; and when it is over, all eyes turn towards the gangway which leads from the dressing-rooms. They await the entry of the gladiators, or, if you prefer it, the entry of the circus beasts. Here they are, two human bulls, in coloured dressing-gowns, and a roar accompanies them as they approach the ring. It is a roar woven of cheers and boos : cheers for Hans and boos for Wolf ; but once they are at their corners, all voices converge upon Wolf, in a drum-fire of laughter and jeers. The galleries rise that they may jeer better.

" *Poor . . . old . . . Wolf ! . . . Poor . . . old . . . Wolf ! . . . Dirty . . . old . . . Wolf !* " And they give him the dicky bird whistle again ; and Eddie Pope—it is his biggest success of the evening—starts to sing, " I saw stars. I heard a birdie sing . . . " and the galleries, delighted at such aptness, sing it with him. It perishes in a bog of jeers.

And Wolf stands in his corner, facing the stool and bucket, and refusing to undo his dressing-gown till this rudeness stops. It continues ; it swells ; and he merely shrugs his shoulders and waits, his face to the corner, his back to the majority of the house. It is defiance. It is dignity. And it is delight for his persecutors.

And Eddie and Pete and Roddy believe in the fine performance. They are determined to believe in it. To disbelieve in it, to call it hooley, would be death to the delights of indignation and vocal punishment. Admiration for Wolf as a fine showman would disarm the lyncher in one's heart. They do not ask how comes it that Wolf tops every bill, and is one of the few highly paid gentlemen of the mat. They do not perceive, because they do not want to, that he is simply a salesman who has discovered what his public wants, which is " colour " in the ring, and that if you want to be colourful, you cannot be clean. His public wants a show of ill-temper, bad sportsmanship, and blind, maddened fury. Deliver the stuff then. Out of the wages of such things a pub may be bought and one's old age provided for. Is not your opponent of the same mind ? Sure : he will concert items with you in the dressing-room.

The referee brings the contestants together that they may shake hands, but Wolf declines. Fine showmanship. To shake Mr. Ulfborg's hand would seem a promise of fair and friendly play, and he is making no such promise to-night. Boos, hisses ; and a dignified return of Wolf to his corner till such time as the crowd treats him like a gentleman. Angry altercation with the referee who is bidding him start. A shaking of his fist at the jeering galleries. Then he calmly removes his dressing-gown.

The fight has begun. Like two gorillas these short-legged, ponderous men crouch and crawl around each other, looking for an opening. By habit they grunt, though there is no excuse for breathless grunting yet. They close, they are locked, and to a crescendo of enthusiasm Hans acquires a mastery over Wolf and hurls him to the mat. Staged? Do not ask? Wolf rises and pads round the Dane, and if it is acted, no actor ever portrayed better a hissing wrath and vindictiveness. His jaw is set at an ugly angle, his teeth bare themselves, his eyes transfix the Dane with a sinister glint. The Merseyside Terror is drawing near the Dane. He runs in—and who shall describe the next half hour, who believe it? Many of the holds and throws are skilful and legitimate, but they are not the body of our exultation—they are almost disappointments—they are the dilution of the wine—we exult to cry vengeance when Wolf is dragging at the Dane's hair, pressing his thumbs into his eyeballs, twisting his ears and fingers, and stamping on his hands when he is down. Again and again the referee tries to stop him, while the crowd cries, "We want a *ref.* Give us a *ref.* Anyone want to buy a second-hand *ref.*?" but he will not stop, and the referee, exhorted thereto by a hundred voices, tries to drag him from his victim by the hair. "That's right, Fred! Lummy, the *ref.*'s woken up!" Wolf turns and picks up the referee and hurls him over the ropes into the ringside seats. Yells of laughter. "Good-bye, *ref.*" The referee falls on his feet like a cat—he is used to these sidelines from the more colourful wrestlers—and vaults back into the kettle of fury. Now Wolf and Hans are locked and rolling together; and Wolf, with teeth shut like pincers, is dragging at his hair again, and twisting his fingers to break them; and the referee is straining to pull him off, and crying, "M.C. wanted, please"; and the tiny M.C. in his evening dress leaps into the melee (uproarious cheers for his heroism) and strains at Wolf too, and the seconds, summoned by him, jump in and pull their weight, while Wolf turns to strike one and kick another, and, between times, continues his handiwork on the Dane. But the four men, the rescue party, tear him away; and he stands up and argues hotly with them, and shapes up to fight them all, but in the din no one can hear his argument; and he comes to the ropes to spread his hands to the spectators in an appeal for fair play and freedom from interference. How can he fight five men at once? Be reasonable. Jibes and boos greet his appeal, and he shakes his fist at the boosers, and they laugh, at which he makes as if to jump the ropes and run amok among them.

Hans meanwhile stands panting and glowering in his corner. He calls out an abusive word at Wolf, who promptly deserts the audience and rushes at Hans to thrust it back down his throat, but the little M.C., a David among the Goliaths, flings himself

between the men, covers the threatened Hans with his little evening-dressed body, and extends wide his arms. Universal acclamation. Deafening appreciation of a great-hearted little man.

Some quiet and order have been induced, and the referee is heard warning Wolf in his corner, "Next time, Gratten, out you go!" which the audience in its offended purity endorses with loud cheers. Sullenly the fight is resumed, only to boil up into the same brew, except that now Hans is using all the ferocious tricks of his opponent, encouraged to do so, yelled into doing so, by an audience drunk with righteousness and wrath.

"That's right. Give 'im some of his own dirt."

"Pull his hair out."

"Knuckle-punch him, Hans. He's arst for it."

"Slosh him, boy! That's it! Hooray! Got him! Got him! *And again! And again! Hooray!*"

For now Hans has driven him to the ropes and, using his bent elbows like clubs, is swinging them, left, right, left, right, against Wolf's jaw, and the blows sound sullen and dead like mallet blows on wood.

"One. Two. THREE! FOUR!" Eddie, agog and alight, shouts the number of the blows. "Five! Six! Seven! Caw! Look at that, Roddy! Eight! Nine! Caw! What do you say to that, Gilly? *And again! And again!*"

Such punishment works Wolf into a frenzy that will stop at nothing. Writhing out of it, he fights with his clenched fists, kidney punching and abdomen punching; he gouges, bites, and scratches. It must be stopped; but the referee cannot hold him; the referee and the M.C. cannot hold him; the referee, the M.C., the seconds, the manager, and the promoter cannot hold him; and the audience in the general farce are hurling apple cores, ice-cream cartons, cigarette ends, and screwed-up programmes on to the floor of the ring. Eddie, laughing like one crazed, fetches all the missiles from his pockets and flings them one after another. Roddy, no less happy, does the same. Pete stands grinning and watching curiously, as he sways this way and that, to miss nothing. The referee in despair cries, "*Ring that bell! Ring it!*" and the timekeeper loudly sounds "time" like a tocsin on his big ship's bell; and the referee shouts at the M.C., who announces with his shrill voice, "Wolf Gratten is disqualified"; and all the spectators, still on their feet, wait to see the new battle between Wolf, for the one part, and referee, M.C., seconds, and manager, for the other. But Wolf's second, soothing the opposite faction and sweetening his man with reasonable words, persuades him to come away; and he, after a last shake of his fist at the mob which is so unkind to him, snatches up his dressing-gown, hurls the basin at his opponent, vaults the ropes, and hurries towards the dressing-rooms like a

wounded beast. A tidal wave of triumphant contempt follows him down the gangway—but is it not flushed through with appreciation? He has given us good entertainment, and we can go home, satisfied and laughing, and feeling that we have been alive to-night.

XIII

NONE of the youths in Paget and Lamb's saw the headline, because they did not read the morning papers. In the afternoons they would glance through the evening editions for the racing results, and on wet Sunday mornings they might sink themselves in the melodramatic or salacious columns of a Sunday journal. In their lunch hours, or in empty minutes behind their counters, they read American Adventure and Detection magazines. So it was that neither Roddy nor Eddie, on a day in the autumn of that year, saw a paragraph in the morning papers headed. "Girl Attacked on Lonely Common. Police Hunt for Man." Neither Jack Hornby nor Arnold Carr saw it. Mr. Cottrell and Mr. Niven had glanced at the *Daily Telegraph* as they ate their breakfasts, but *they* had not observed it, because the *Telegraph* is a dignified paper and had assigned the story to a corner. No one, then, mentioned it to the young men, and they sold their bacon, their soda, and their sugar, unaware that a detective story, with real, warm, living characters, was unravelling itself in the streets around their shop.

Brixton Police Station stands half-way between the house that was Roddy's and the shop where he worked. It stands on a peninsula site formed by the confluence of two side roads which merge at this point with Brixton Road. It stands, indeed, almost on the very place where, a hundred and fifty years ago, the old Watch House stood—on a green salient, with the Effra stream curving round it to greet the Brixton Road. Roddy had cycled past it this morning, and it had looked as quiet as ever. No coming and going on its steps; no van nor motor bicycle waiting in one of the side streets; no sound of telephone bells shrilling through the glass of its windows; no crowd of gapers drawn to the pavements and gutters before it. It was as impassive as the face of a great detective should be, and, no doubt, as busy.

Uncle Vic read all about the outrage. When Uncle Vic went to his music room to compose, he usually took the morning paper with him. And, the door latched upon his privacy, he would sink into his soft chair and examine the day's news before setting to work. And when he had read all he wanted to, he would scan the pages again, one after another, for more to tempt his appetite. A headline, "Girl Attacked on Lonely Common," most certainly tempted his appetite; and when he saw it this morning in its

lonely corner, on his second examination of the paper, he lapped it up hungrily and was pleased.

"The police of South London," he read, "are searching for a young man who is alleged to have attacked Miss Phoebe Malling, 18, a domestic servant, in a lonely part of Tooting Bec Common last night. Miss Malling, who is employed by Mr. and Mrs. Henstall, of The Limes, Graycombe Avenue, Wandsworth, returned to the house in a state bordering on hysteria, with her face bruised and scratched and her clothes torn. The young man met her, she stated, as she was walking along the footpath by the horse-ride. This is a shady path running between a long wall and a line of old trees, and it was from behind one of these trees that the young man came out and spoke to her." From this point the reporter, it was obvious, had made brief work of Miss Malling's indignant prolixity. "Miss Malling stated that he was a pleasant-spoken young man, and she walked with him a little way. After crossing the main road which bisects the common, they came to a wood by the railway cutting, and it was here that the young man suddenly tried to assault her. She screamed and resisted, and he put his hand over her mouth, telling her to stop, but as she continued, he threw her to the ground and tried to strangle her. It was only the sound of steps in the railway cutting that caused him to get up and run away."

And as Uncle Vic read the story in his music room, and read it a second time for its interest, other men, in railway trains, in buses, and in trams, were reading it in noisier papers which, snatching at its news value, had featured it more prominently. These men learned that Miss Malling was "a pretty, fair-haired girl of eighteen, of a quiet, refined type"; and they were given some of her actual words. "He came out from behind a big tree and asked me if he was going the right way to Streatham Park, and as he was a very polite young man and I was strolling in that direction, I consented to walk a little way with him. We crossed the main road, just where it goes over the railway bridge, and he suggested that we should leave the path and walk through a kind of long wood that runs by the railings of the railway. I had no objection, as he seemed such a polite young man; but after we had gone about four hundred yards, he suddenly set upon me and tried to assault me. And when I screamed and fought, he forced his hand over my mouth and said, 'Stop that, or I'll kill you!' and as I continued struggling and screaming, he tried to throttle me. If it hadn't been for someone coming along the cutting, I'm sure I should have been murdered. When he had run away, I tried to find a policeman, but as I couldn't see one, I came back home, where my mistress telephoned to the police. I last saw the young man running in the direction we had come."

And for their further entertainment they saw in the stop press column: "The police have issued the following description of the young man wanted in connection with the attack on a girl in a lonely part of Tooting Bec Common. Age about 22; height about 5 feet, 11 inches; slight build; well-dressed in a neat blue suit and brown shoes; speaks with a cultured accent. This description, based on the statement of Miss Malling, tallies with a further description furnished by a man who saw a youth running along the horse-ride as if he were making for Drewstead Road, which abuts on the common. The police are hopeful of making an arrest within the next twenty-four hours."

It was Saturday morning in the shop, and by half-past eleven the greater part of the floor, from cash desk to doors, was littered with old broken cases and cartons in which the made-up orders had been placed till the errand boys or the van should return and collect them for delivery. Business was at high pressure: customers waited along the counters; assistants hastened from one customer to another; money jingled at the window of the cash desk; and Mr. Cottrell's voice rose above the low hubbub of talk as, spectacles low on his nose, he paddled among the cases and cartons labelled Brasso, Bluebell, Saxa Salt, Margarine, Quaker Oats, and Bird's Custard Powder, either checking the orders and shouting for new goods, or soothing an impatient customer by loud appeals to his counter hands. "Grocery, Mr. Pope. Is the customer to wait all day while you. . . . They'll see to you in one moment, madam. . . . Put me up a half of butter, Carr, and a pound of lard. . . . Put these things together and get 'em off to 54 Loughborough. . . . Those things gone yet to No. 9 Singleton? Oh, Pete's taken 'em, has he? Good. . . . Grocery, someone. Where on earth has Arnold got to? . . . One minute, madam. . . . Mrs. Witley's book. Didn't it go along with the goods? Sorry, madam, we've got a new young lady at the desk. . . . Anyone attending to you, sir? No? Grocery, Mr. Stewart. . . ."

And Roddy, actively serving this latest customer, was quite unexcited when a man, not very tall, but of powerful build, and dressed in a brown lounge suit which toned with his thick reddish hair, strolled into the shop and, after standing for a minute behind the purchasing women, while with his hands in his pockets he threw a casual glance round the furniture of the place and the people in it, wandered up to Roddy and said very pleasantly, "Good morning. Is the manager about anywhere?"

"Yes, sir. He's—he was here a moment ago."

"Well, could I speak to him? I won't detain him long."

"Certainly, sir. I'll—oh, but there he is. He's just come back. He's that gentleman over there, sir, behind the wine counter."

"Ah yes," agreed the reddish man, as if he recognized Mr. Cottrell. "Thank you."

And, his hands still in his pockets, he strolled across the floor, stepping over or winding through the cases and the cartons, to engage Mr. Cottrell. Mr. Cottrell raised his face, looked over his glasses, and began, "Yes, sir? What can I——" but in the same instant appeared to recognize the visitor, for he exclaimed with a smile, "Hallo, Mr. Gowry! Well, what are *you* after? We've all been behaving ourselves, haven't we? . . . Just one minute, Mr. Gowry, if you don't mind."

"It's all right, Mr. Cottrell, if you're busy. I can wait. There's no great hurry, I don't think."

And that was the last that Roddy heard, because Eddie was at his side and whispering mysteriously, "D'you know who that is?"

"No?" Roddy was stirred by the low-voiced question.

"That's Divisional Detective Inspector Gowry, of Brixton Police Station."

Roddy stared; and immediately before his mind's eye stood Brixton Police Station, with its rows of official-looking windows facing the junction of the roads, and its rows of barred cell windows, set high above the pavement in one of its side walls. The picture stimulated the action of his heart. "No? Is it really? Sure?"

"Sure? *Course* I'm sure. Didn't we have a shop-lifting case when I was at Sanderson's—more than one, as a matter of fact—I know his mug as well as I know my dad's."

"But he doesn't look like a cop."

"Doesn't he? Well, he *is*. And a darned smart one too. Yes, I should say so! One of the smartest in London, old boy. That's why he's a Divisional Detective Inspector as young as he is. It was him that landed Scottie Duncan who did that murder in Lucas Crescent two years ago. One of the smartest bits of detective work ever." Eddie was still young enough (and probably always will be) to like the savour of superlatives.

"Well, that's the only cop I've ever seen with ginger hair. They just don't have it."

"Can't help that. That's Divisional Detective Inspector Gowry. Guess he's seen enough to make his hair turn ginger."

"What exactly is a Divisional Detective Inspector, then?"

"Absolute boss of the C.I.D., so far as this division is concerned. Almost as high as you can get. Though they all say Gowry'll be a Superintendent before he's done."

Roddy turned to stare at Mr. Gowry as at a celebrity. "But what's he want?"

"I dunno. Search me. Perhaps the old man's been cheating some. Perhaps he's been damping the sugar, or monkeying with

the scales. Selling underweight, the old devil! The cops are always watching out for that."

"No—honestly—what's he after?"

"How should *I* know? He hasn't told me, my old idiot. Go and arst him, I should."

But just then Roddy, still watching Mr. Cottrell and his distinguished visitor, thought he heard Mr. Cottrell say, "Well, better do it now, then. . . . Come inside. There's no time like the present," and the two men went through the door by the cash desk, Mr. Cottrell leading, and the young inspector trailing behind, with his hands in his pockets. Bending forward over his counter, Roddy saw them walk along the dark passage that led to the manager's private apartments. He heard Mr. Cottrell's dining-room door close upon them. And a minute after, just as he had finished taking the order of a young woman, and was sucking his pencil over its items, he felt Eddie's touch upon his sleeve.

"Sh-h-h-h!" whispered Eddie. "Look who's out there. That's another of 'em, you can bet your life."

Roddy shot his gaze along the line of Eddie's, and there on the pavement, idling before the shop window, with his hands in his pockets, stood a big man, much taller than the inspector, in a bowler hat and a blue serge suit, well worn but well brushed. His hands, deep in his pockets, thrust open his jacket and uncurtained a broad waistcoat festooned with a heavy gold watch-chain and a trio of silver medals.

"That's a 'tec, and no mistake," assured Eddie. "That's one who'll never be able to disguise himself if he lives to be a hundred. Got *cop* written all over him."

"But what the hell—what's up?" demanded Arnold Carr, a dumpy, rosy lad, who had come along from the provision counter.

"They're on the track of someone, not a doubt of that, Chubby, my boy. If it's not the old man himself, I expect it's one of the customers they want to check up on. They'll probably be taking statements from *us* next. Or it may be one of the travellers that's wanted."

"Yes," said Carr chubbily. "Some guy that's travelled a bit too far."

"Do you think old Cottrell'll tell us?" asked Roddy eagerly.

"Not he," declared Eddie. "He'll go all pompous and secret about it. You know what the old cockatoo— Yes, madam? . . . No, I'm afraid I'm out of Quick Quakers at the moment. When shall we have those Quick Quakers, Mr. Hornby?"

"Might have some, Tuesday."

"Might have some, Tuesday, madam."

Roddy turned to Arnold Carr. "Do you suppose they'll really take statements from us, Chubby?"

"They may, if we can put them wise to anything."

"Gee! It must be exciting to be a 'tec. Do you think they'll——"

"Yes, madam? Are you being served?"

Carr turned to a customer, and Roddy, having moved away, piled up an order for Jimmy, the errand boy, who was back in the shop. This done, he served an old lady, and was stowing the parcels in her shopping bag, when he heard low voices in the passage and saw Mr. Cottrell and the red-haired inspector returning.

The manager's face was frightened and strained; the inspector's as unworried as when he first came in. Mr. Cottrell went behind the wine counter, but did nothing when he got there: he just stood like a man bemused, now pulling his lip, now poking his pencil into his hair. The inspector went straight through the shop to the door, and Roddy, his wits pricked alert, noticed that he hadn't said good-day to Mr. Cottrell: evidently he was not going yet. He stood on the threshold for ten seconds; then wandered along the pavement out of view. Two seconds after that the big man in the bowler hat completed his study of the window goods, and rambled off, hands in pockets, in Mr. Gowry's direction. So what? Mr. Niven, the grey-haired first provision hand at work on the bacon machine, was in a position to keep observation through the window, and he reported to his juniors. Just as they supposed: the inspector and the big man were conferring twenty yards away—now the big man was crossing the road—now he was walking in the direction of the police station—and now the inspector was strolling back.

He walked through the shop again and down the back passage, without a "by your leave" to anyone, as if the place belonged to him.

"Gosh! The bailiffs are in!" suggested Eddie.

"The police are in possession of the blooming shop," chirped Arnold Carr. "And look at old Cottrell."

Mr. Cottrell had gone to the threshold and was standing there with his spectacles in his hand, while he peered up and down the road. He stood there a long time, turning his head first one way and then the other; and at length, not seeing what he sought, he returned thoughtfully across the floor of the shop, tapping the spectacles on his palm. One of the girls in the cash desk tried to question him about a book, but he shook an impatient hand at her and muttered, "Oh damn. . . . Don't worry me now"; and went down the passage to join the inspector.

"Such goings on!" commented Eddie.

Now Mr. Niven, his eye ever roving to the window, reported that the big man was coming back with another nearly as big.

"The first cove's a sergeant," he opined sagely. "He's the

sergeant on the case, along with his chief. And this cove, who's much younger, is just a mere constable come to give 'em a hand."

"Blimey, we're surrounded!" grimaced Arnold Carr.

"Such goings on!" repeated the delighted Eddie.

It had sunk into the quiet hour before lunch. Business was still; the shop empty. Mr. Niven sliced rashers at his machine; Carr was filling the "silent salesman" which stood in the midst of the floor; and Roddy was assembling orders for Jimmy, and for Pete when he returned with the van. He was longing for Pete's return, that he might pour these thrilling events into his ears.

Pete drove up in the van. He slipped from the driving seat, slammed the door, and skirted round the bonnet on to the pavement. He glanced quickly along the pavement and—for a second he stood quite still. He had seen the two big men lounging a few yards away. His face went paper-white. But he seemed to set his teeth in his lip and take control of himself. He came into the shop and walked quickly towards the piled-up orders with a smile—a sick smile. Never had Roddy seen a face so white or a smile so dead. Against that whiteness Pete's hair seemed darker than usual, and his eyes blacker. He came to the counter and cleared his throat as if to speak, but he did not; and Roddy, benumbed by the visitation of knowledge, could only stare at him.

And then Mr. Cottrell came along the passage and mumbled gently, "Just a minute, Pete, old man. I want you to come in here a minute. Come along, old boy."

"Yes, sir? . . ." Pete lifted his dark eyebrows, affecting surprise.

"Yes, come on, come on," snapped Mr. Cottrell, now a little impatiently.

"All right, sir."

And Pete followed him along the dark passage, and the distant door closed on them.

"Coffee Essence, medium size, pound of tea, Primrose Margarine," Jack Hornby was saying. "Yes, madam. You shall have them in about an hour's time. Good morning."

Nothing more happened in the shop: the inspector was not seen again there. Roddy could not discuss the incredible suspicion with his fellows, because some customers had come in and were attached to them. But when the shop emptied again, he discovered that the suspicion was everybody's. They gathered to exchange it. That dead white face! That sickly smile! That summons! This present silence! "Stuff! They only want him for a statement about something. They'll be summoning *you* next." But why did he look like that? Why did he turn the

colour of lard? Why did he goggle like a rabbit in a trap? Could he have done something? A burglary or something?

Nothing more happened in the shop to answer them. The girls in the cash desk wrote in their ledgers like two of Time's secretaries recording the moments as they passed. Once a figure moved in the dark passage—Mr. Cottrell's—and took away a coat from the pegs there. Silence in the back parts; and suddenly Mr. Niven, on observation near the window, announced, "It's right, boys. He's gone off with the two of 'em. He's walking between Ginger Gowry and the big fellow. The other cove's crossed over to the other side of the road. He wasn't wanted after all. Our Pete went quietly."

"Are they holding him?"

"No. They seem to be chatting together quite friendly. Nobody who didn't know'd think it was a knock-off."

"Perhaps it isn't. Perhaps he's only wanted to identify somebody, or something."

"One doesn't generally bring three men—and all plain clothes guys too—but woa! here's the old man."

Mr. Cottrell had emerged from the passage, his face strained and hot. The incident in his dining room, whatever it was, seemed to have caused his skin to steam, for he passed a handkerchief round his collar, looked at it stupidly as if to analyse the moisture it had absorbed, and then patted it on his nape and on his temples, and studied it again. But, contrary to Eddie's surmise, he had no thought of keeping his knowledge tight within himself. Rather, feeling it too much to hold, he was anxious to vent it.

"Well, that's our Pete," he said, with a resigned shrug, as he used the handkerchief to wipe his glasses. "We shan't see our Pete again. Not for a long time. Not for a very long time, I'm afraid." And since the shop was empty, in the last minutes before one o'clock, all drew near to hear. Some came and stared at him from behind the counter; others went to his side, where he stood between counter and cash desk. "Years, they'll give him; years."

"But what is it? What on earth's happened?"

"They're putting him where they can find him. And I don't blame 'em, either."

"Arrested?"

"Of course. And for a darned serious crime too. It's nice for us all, I must say. So good for the business!"

"But what—what's he done?"

"Nearly murdered a girl, that's all. It's all in the paper: I've just been looking at it. Tried to assault a young servant in a lonely part of Tooting Common and, when she resisted, set about strangling her. That's your would-be parson! Did you

ever hear anything like it? Well, he'll have plenty of time to study theology now."

A few of them, sycophants, laughed slightly, since their manager had attempted a melancholy jest.

"And he did it when he was out with my van! I sent him to Earle and Hope's late last evening for a whole lot of stuff they'd never sent, and the young devil keeps the van all night, and goes cruising about with it, looking for a likely girl. This is *Berry* I'm talking about: Pete Berry, and no one else! It just shows you. And when he finds her, and she screams, he tries to kill her rather than be caught."

"He never did that—he never tried to kill anybody," declared Roddy. "Not Pete! Good lord, no! . . ." but then a little doubt twisted in his declaration like a microbe just hatched, and he began to understand.

"He did it all right. And never has anyone, I should think, muddled a crime more completely. He just *asks* for a man like Ginger Gowry to get him. The young idiot parks my van in a side street full of neat little villas, and slap up against the common—at ten o'clock at night, mind you. He leaves it there for an hour or so, for everyone to notice and wonder about, and with 'Paget and Lamb, Brixton Road' as large as life on it. And when his girl screams, and he hears footsteps, he runs straight as a die for it, and is seen. He's not only a foul-minded young swine but, for all his so-called cleverness, a blithering idiot too."

"There may be some mistake somewhere," Eddie offered, but not hopefully.

"You wouldn't have thought there was any mistake if you'd seen his face. His face was just a white sheet with 'Oh God, am I caught?' stamped all over it. I felt sorry for him, I don't mind telling you, terribly sorry for him. I've never seen anyone look quite like that before—a greenish white, like cheese. It's rather terrible. In a sense I'm glad they've got him, because that lad whom I saw would have committed suicide in another ten minutes."

"Good lord, good lord!" murmured Mr. Niven, shaking his head.

"He tried to brazen it out, of course, but it was plain as a pike-staff that he was lying . . . all stammering and stuttering and then going completely silent, poor devil. Well, well, there you are. Shut the doors, Carr. . . . What, isn't it one o'clock? O.K., leave 'em open, then. We don't want anyone to think we've gone into mourning. . . . Business as usual. . . . But Pete, *Pete!* Good lord, good lord!"

§

That night, as it began to grow dark, a figure walked along Drewstead Road in the direction of the common. A young man's figure; and he walked rapidly; he seemed at once interested in the road, and anxious to get out of it. It was Roddy, and as his eyes gazed ahead for the first sight of the common, his head was as quick with interest as when he was reading one of his detective thrillers; but he was not without shame. For some reason he felt ashamed to be hurrying secretly to look upon the places where Pete had yielded to the darkness in him. He would have told no one else that he had been longing all day for this hour. And he did not understand why these places called him, promising a dark pleasure. He knew only that the call was insistent, and not to be denied.

Such a quiet road this, so tidy and clean, with its ornate gabled houses, each in its own small garden. Nothing moved in it, except the first yellow leaves of the September fall. And along it, in his stolen van, Pete had come, his guilty purpose driving him, even as he was driving the van: his heart shaking, no doubt, and his hands unhappy on the wheel. And there was the grass of the common at the pavement's end. There against the kerb he had parked the van. Through those posts he had slipped on to the common.

Roddy followed in his track. Yes, there was the shady footpath running between a wooden fence and the ancient elms. And there was the horse-ride, a cinder track, keeping it company all the way. Here the girl had wandered alone, driven too, perhaps, by a longing for love—or for the shadow of it. And by one of the trees the shadow had lurked, his body throbbing with need. Which? Here they had slowly walked together, she no doubt encouraging him with ambiguous glances and words. Here, just as the papers had said, was the main road which they had crossed; and, yes, that long spinney of young trees must be the wood where the thing was done.

Roddy crossed the road and walked into it. It was little more than a fringe of thorns and ashes and chestnuts, but there were sheltered bowers here and there for those who wanted to embrace. Only the expanse of grass behind and the railway cutting in front would hear their low words and the soft sounds of their encounter. Except that—and had this been Pete's mistake?—a linesman's cabin sat like a doll's house on the brink of the cutting a little way down the line. In each of the likely alcoves Roddy scanned the ground for trodden grass or broken earth—or shreds of torn clothing. Here. There had been a disturbance of the grass

here : it was tramped and yellow. Perhaps this was the place ; and it was a strange dark thrill to look at it.

Poor Pete. For Roddy understood. He must condemn—of *course* he must condemn what Pete had done—but he understood. He understood it from its beginning to its end. He understood the lonely hungering. Why call it foul-minded when we were all made like that ? *He* was made like that. And it was not animal appetite only : at its best it was a longing for something lovely that would give itself to him. He understood how all Pete's effort to become a parson had been unreal : it was not the reality of him, though he may have tried to believe it was ; it was a bid for escape from a shop boy's prison into a larger air. This, this which had happened here, was the reality of Pete, though a ruined reality : it was his bid for beauty and love.

But the brutal assault, the mad strangling ? He understood these too. The girl screams, and her scream is a knife-stab of terror. One must stop it at all costs. For as strong as, and even stronger than, our craving for love is our need of self-preservation. Oh, well could Roddy, whose good name meant so much to him, understand's Pete's passionate need to save his name from death. It is ignoble, but one loves oneself better than a stranger. When one's control is snapped, one will even attempt to kill. What suffering there had been here : a madness of terror in the girl, a madness of terror in Pete ; but at the end Pete's agony was the greater. Ignoble agony, but its ignobility would only increase it. Roddy understood the mad run away, and the wild straight rush to the van. And now he understood, because he was almost experiencing it, Pete's sufferings throughout all last night and this morning, till the deathly hour of arrest. Good God, one had only to think of them. . . .

A drum-roll like approaching thunder ; it swelled in volume ; and an express train tore the night silence with a grinding and screaming in the cutting below, and a racing of lights and shadows. It rent his thoughts too ; and he could not gather them again till the ground beneath him stopped quivering like a jarred animal, and the train had carried its thunder and its indifference into the midst of London.

And now in his cell. Pete sitting on his bedboard beneath one of those barred windows that broke the wall of Brixton Police Station. In that cell there throbbed at this moment a suffering as great as any in the world. Could he perhaps say a word for Pete at his trial ? If so, he would have his name in all the papers, and be a public figure, people praising him for his loyalty to a friend—but there ! he was feeling pleased : for a second he had been glad of Pete's disaster since it might provide a pedestal for his own glory. Bah ! As he had said, one loves oneself better

than another. Was he so much better than Pete? He had the same furtive hunger in his body, and the same driving egotism in his head. And yet he was made like that, made like it, made like it. . . .

The spinney was darkening around him now, and with a sigh he turned and walked away from this place. He walked back through the wood, and along the footpath, defeated by the bewilderments of life.

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PART II

I

WHEN Roddy worked at Morton's Stores, and Brixton Crossways was the centre of his world, he knew well enough that three of the five roads that radiated from the crossways' rim began to rise. Give a boy a trade bicycle, and load its basket high, and he will know exactly at what point the roads tilt upwards.

And when he worked at Paget and Lamb's, he knew that all the streets around were flat: an endless reticulation of streets on ground as flat as a frozen lake. And he learned that all the greater roads led at last to the bridges.

But he did not look behind this knowledge to see what it meant. His education had not taught him to do this. Conducted in crowded classrooms, and ceasing at the very age when he was ready to respond to it, it had given him some small arithmetic, some factual history and geography, and some exceedingly diluted divinity, but it had not given him its essential gift, which is the power to probe into the significance of things. He extracted no exciting significance from the tilt of the roads round Brixton Crossways, nor from the endless flatness of the streets embraced by the river.

But supposing Education, a masculine thing, had played the masculine trick on his imagination (which was not sterile) and had stirred it into creativeness? Supposing it had strengthened it to create wonder and vision? Vision, like a genie of the lamp, might have wafted all the houses of South London away, and thirty centuries with them, and shown him an arc of low cliffs round the tidal flats, and the river curving in a slack loop from one end of the arc to the other. (And he would know that Time, by slow attrition, would turn those cliffs into gentle gradients, later to be known as Clapham Rise, Brixton Hill, and all the hills of Lewisham, Blackheath and Greenwich.) He would see the tide advance over the swamp till it lapped the feet of the cliffs, and then withdraw (withdraw over Brixton Road and Paget and Lamb's and the Archbishop's Palace and Vauxhall and all South London) till the Thames was shrunk to a silver ribbon again, winding round a level and peaty morass. The morass is waving with sedge and sword-flag, and lit by solitary pools, desolate meres, and veining streams. There are no English there yet, and perhaps no men at all; only the bitterns and the herons, the ducks and

the grey lag-geese. And at night the curlews moaning overhead, and the sea birds calling.

Here is a parcel of land looped round by hills and the river. Or we may see it as an open theatre, the arc of hills its tiered seats, and the wet, oval plain its arena. See, dim figures are raising an embankment along the river; they have disciplined its tides; and the morass, before our eyes, turns into ploughland, orchard, and wood. A few houses spring up among the trees: a King's palace, an Archbishop's palace, an Abbot's inn, and the homes of the gamekeepers who preserve the wild fowl. A few villages appear, as the farmers and crofters increase on the fat, alluvial soil: and in time the pleasure gardens: Paris Gardens, where the bull baiting was (right opposite the Ring), Cuper's Gardens (which lie under Waterloo Road), Lambeth Wells (which sleep beneath the pavement of Lambeth Walk), and, most famous of all (and those of which we shall need to speak further for the purposes of this story) the Royal Gardens of Vauxhall.

And now the bridges are being built; though this is not till the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, so sturdily have the forty thousand watermen of the river and the portly merchants of the City resisted these threats to their trade. And the great roads hurry towards the bridges from the pleasant hamlets on upland or plain; and the merchants build themselves fine houses along the sides of the roads.

And now—it is a change as great as that worked by the walling up of the tide—the Industrial Age comes south to London. It takes over all rights in the Surrey bank; and a champaign that for ten centuries has been given to tillage and pleasure is handed over to Industry. The crowds assemble. Gardens, orchards, fields and woods, and the very streams themselves, go down beneath factories, warehouses, distilleries, breweries, shops, and long rows of workmen's dwellings; and the railways on their brick viaducts stride hither and thither among the roofs. Like the old tide from the Thames the pavements and the macadam and the asphalt yards advance over the grass. And a tide of men comes from the City, workers from its offices and counting houses, who will sleep at night in this monstrous new suburb south of the river. The merchants and gentry fly to the uplands, but the New Age pursues them, climbing the hills. The villages which had housed a few hundreds distend and merge together into a town of two millions, thrown like a counterpane over the flats and the hills.

In the search for profit a wide green loveliness has been destroyed in a morning, and the far-thrown mass of South London is throbbing and thrumming and smoking beneath the clean, blue sky.

And this was the world into which Roddy Stewart awoke, and Fay Warren, the usherette at the Red Domes Cinema. This was

the rapacious environment ready to grasp them and squeeze out of them a profit, while they were fresh and lively and cheap. But before we speak of Fay Warren we must give further thought to Vauxhall Gardens, those fashionable, ornate, and most illustrious gardens, because the haunted past of Vauxhall makes such a strange background to the story of Roddy Stewart and Fay Warren, which excited South London a few years ago, and is now forgotten.

II

LET us search for Vauxhall Gardens.

If you cross over Vauxhall Bridge and step on to the Surrey Side, you see before you an archway piercing the lofty viaduct which here runs parallel with the river. All the roads with their flowing traffic turn under it like draining streams. And because the arch is flanked by flat towers it looks like the Main Gate in a city wall. It is, to be sure, quite like one of the great gates that break the Aurelian walls of Rome, and we may properly think of it as the *Porta del Popolo* of South London.

You go through the Gate: that is, you walk through a tunnel so long that it is unlikely you will reach the daylight again before a train roars above you. Trams and lorries go through with you, and their stridor reverberates against the white-tiled walls and under the black, imprisoning roof, so that you are glad to emerge into the light and freedom of Upper Kennington Lane. Not that the Lane is still a country track; for it is now a rattling highway between shops and churches and public houses, and its two converging skylines, with their cornices, spires and chimneys, stand irregular and dark against the sky.

Now, as you issue from the tunnel, look left, and you will see Goding Street. It is important that you look well at Goding Street, a gloomy ravine between the grey arches of the viaduct and the grey cliffs of flat three-storied houses. Continue looking left as you pass on: it is important. You cross the mouths of four more streets: Auckland Street, Glynn Street, Tyers Street, and St. Oswald's Place. Two of them, like Goding Street, are deep ravines between tall three-storied houses, and two are long shallow gullies between small two-storied houses. Some of the houses are good working-class dwellings; others are less good; and others are bad, and already condemned. If you have eyes for everything as you glance up these streets, you will see a grimy warehouse or two and the store of a scrap-iron merchant and the little struggling shops at every corner and the multi-coloured advertisements high on the side walls—"Stick to Beer," "Smith's Potato Crisps," "Beer is Best"—and everywhere the women gossiping on their thresholds and the children playing in the road.

And that was Vauxhall Gardens. Here for two hundred years was Pleasure's own plantation on the Surrey bank. Here were the

trees massed in squares, with the broad walks running between them ; and all the trees so hung with fairy lamps that you would have said it was an apple orchard with every apple alight. Here, right across the present lie of the streets, ran the Grand, or King's, Walk, between the arcaded and illuminated supper boxes and the trees and lanterns of the Grove. Like a little Champs-Élysées it ran straight as a gardener's line to a climax at its vista's end, which was the revolving Evening Star. Parallel with it ran the Italian Walk, spanned at intervals by Italianate arches and lined by tall poplars like soldiers along a processional way. Bisecting these two walks at right-angles ran the Chinese Walk which culminated in the Transparency, a shining tableau of Vesuvius in Eruption.

But more celebrated than the broad walks, or more notorious, were the Dark Walks, where the girls lured the lads to listen to the nightingales and to the needs of their own hearts. So intricate were these dark mazes that the most experienced mothers often lost themselves among the trees, looking for their wayward daughters. What happened in the Dark Walks? Sweet, innocent things ; and things less innocent, till at last the proprietor, old Jonathan Tyers, then nearing his end, and perhaps parleying with Conscience as he saw his own dark walk before him, promised to set lamps in the Dark Walks and provide watchmen to keep the peace.

I say that Gye Street, turning out of Goding Street, runs just where the colonnade of supper boxes, all Chinese Gothic and twinkling lights and jingling cutlery, swept into a half-circle to enclose a court of fountains and trees. And opposite the supper boxes was the rectangular Grove with its trees around the Orchestra, an open octagonal temple, where the musicians in a semicircle, and the singers in front of them, rendered the works of Purcell, Handel, and Arne. Behind the supper boxes was the Rotunda, a fine round hall of seventy foot diameter, famous for its bands, its ballets, its fantoccini exhibitions, and its elegant society scandals. And out among the crowding trees were the playbooths and the side-shows : the Smuggler's Cave, the Theatre, the Hermit's Cell, and the Moorish Firework Tower.

Goding Street, Gye Street, Glynn Street, Tyers Street—hither to enjoy the night's laughter, and to promenade along the illuminated avenues, came the citizens from over the water, sometimes to the number of eleven thousand a night ; for nearly two hundred years they came, in hoops and high head-dresses, in bag-wigs and three-cornered hats, in pelisses and crinolines, and in cravats and whiskers and broadcloth. And all, at their first entry, so the chroniclers have told us, would gasp at the avenues a-glitter with thousands of lights, at the sound of music wafted through the trees, at the

Chinese Gothic pavilions, and at the brilliant company thronging and eddying before the lighted colonnades. Here walked Dr. Johnson with Goldsmith and Sir Joshua ; here sauntered Addison and Dick Steele ; here strode the Regent himself, conducting a cluster of visiting kings ; here went the Duke and Blücher, followed by admiring crowds, to see the Realistic Representation of the Battle of Waterloo—and to smile at it, and yawn a little, and wish the Prussians would be quick in coming.

Strange to think that in some spot where now a labourer's wife cooks the family tea in a blackening scullery Horace Walpole sat in a supper box with Lords Orford, Marsh and Kingston, and Lady Caroline, Miss Beauclerk, and Miss Sparre, mincing seven chickens in a china dish, which Lady Caroline then stewed on a lamp with butter, and they expecting every moment to have the dish fly about their ears ; while Betty, the fruit girl, stood smiling at their side, among her baskets of strawberries and cherries and the hampers of dainties and wines.

And now ?

Already when the Duke and Blücher walked there, the plaster glories were flaking and fading, and the trees darkening and rusting beneath the nineteenth century smoke. The chill of the end was in the air. The price of admission declined at the gates, and the cheap and shabby people invaded the Gardens. In the supper boxes, whose wall paintings were now dimming into night, they drank stout and ale instead of champagne and rack punch ; while the statues, weary on their pedestals, watched with a melancholy in their chipped features. They had seen so much, and were ready for the end. And at last, on a July midnight, in 1859, the last firework of Vauxhall died in the Lambeth sky.

And now the criss-cross streets, with their pavements and setts, their houseblocks and tenements, their asphalt and macadam, rest upon the Gardens. Like tombstones they bury the Grand Walk, the Grove, the Dark Walks, and the Rotunda where the masks and dominoes danced. On the dustman's morning the refuse bins line the streets in the place of the tall poplars, and the litter blows along the gutters where once the lovers in the Dark Walks fled from the feet of a watchman. And not one of the women standing at the narrow doors, not one of the children playing hop-scotch on the chalked roadway, not one of the work-soiled labourers returning home for tea, knows what lies under his feet.

Certainly Fay Warren didn't.

§

Fay Warren was born in Tyers Street, in one of the better houses on the western side. Had Tyers Street been set a few yards further east, she would have been conceived and born on the site of one of the supper boxes. As it was, they begot her among the ghosts of the trees that bordered the Chinese Walk. The house that was Fay Warren's is a two-storied semi-basement house; but when, coming home from school, she ran down into the basement front room, she did not know that she was going down into the earth of the old plantation; nor, when she went out to play among the washing in the backyard, that she was treading on the Chinese Walk.

In that basement front room, at two o'clock on a warm Saturday afternoon, in the year when Fay was sixteen, her father, Ernie Warren, sat by the window, scratching his hairy forearm below the roll of his shirt sleeves, and gazing up at the pavement.

"Gaw!" he exclaimed to his wife, who was polishing the table after the mid-day meal. "Someone's going to have a treat. She's gawn out dressed like a tart."

"Who has?"

"Our Fay."

"She hasn't!" The mother repudiated his word. "She dresses beautitully, Fay does. That's one thing I always say, she knows how to wear her clothes. I did myself, when I was her age. People often said it." And for a second or two Maggie Warren polished more quietly, while the past clouded her eyes. "And she's a face and figure that pays for dressing. Not but what she always looks lovely in anything. . . . I never heard her go out, did you? . . . Only this morning Mrs. Preston said she got prettier as she got older. She said she was like a delicate piece of china, she said. Those were her actual words."

"Well, she's a bit on the bright side to-day, I think."

"What she got on?"

"I dunno. Something red. She looked rather like a pillar-box. Lummy, anyone'd think she was grown up, the way she dresses, instead of young enough to have her bottom smacked. All red and white, like a music hall turn."

"Red suits her. It goes with her black hair. So long as it's not *too* red, of course. She's too pale for that. But you can trust Fay: *she* knows."

"Gahn, she shouldn't ought to know at sixteen. And anyhow, where's she awf too, all dressed up like that."

"I dunno. She hasn't said nothing to me. She never tells me much." Maggie was now sweeping up crumbs from the floor with quick, wristy work of dustpan and brush. "Can you see that child, Gracie, anywhere? If you do, shout to her to come in. She's out there, larking about somewhere. No, Fay's fond of me, like, but she never takes me into her confidence, like. She keeps her thoughts to herself. Not like Vi. All over everyone, Vi was. Just the sort of girl to go and do what she done."

"Well, we don't want any of that sort of thing with Fay." Ernie glanced upwards at the pavement in the direction she had gone. "A delicate bit of china—Gaw! If she's a delicate bit of china, what's her ole dad? A fat old chamber-pot, I should say."

"You were handsome enough, once."

"Once! Ha, ha, I like that! Same to you, ole girl! You were prettier than anyone else in our street, I used to reckon, and look at you now—Gaw!"

There was enough affection in the banter for Maggie to say only, as she turned towards the scullery, "Pfoo! If you're coming out, you'd better be getting ready. I'm just going to set a bit of tea for the girls, and then I'll get my hat on. That's why I want Gracie in for a moment, to tell her." And she was gone from the room.

The expression which Ernie had used to describe himself, though coarse, was not inapt. A big man, he was round and florid, and the top of his head was bald and pink and shiny. Though he was less than fifty, his sparse hair above the ears was limp and laced with grey. His face, with flat homely features, had a laughing friendliness, but it was no longer very intelligent. The eyes had been bright once, but now they were faded and liquescent, though laughing. It was a resigned face: the face of a vessel which accepted all that was thrust into it.

At school he had been considered "bright," but, schooldays over, and his home needing nourishment, he had wasted this brightness as a beer boy on a wharf. And when the wharf cast him adrift, he had floated into unskilled labour; and as this is a current from which few escape, he had tossed this way and that as an engineer's labourer for thirty years.

But he had been more fortunate than some. His lively nature had won him popularity; and popularity had secured that his spells of unemployment were few. Seldom, however, in the thirty years had he earned more than fifty shillings a week; sometimes his wage had been as low as forty; and slowly the monotony and hopelessness of it had softened and rotted him as the river rots the driftwood. Long before we see him sitting by his basement window he

had given up ambition. What was worse, he had given up despair. He gave them up at about thirty. He pulled down his castles in the air, and troubled no more to be a dandy. As long as he was sure of food and firing and tobacco and beer, he was content. He laboured through each day, and laughed, and accepted.

His only interests were in the horse on which he had put two bob each way, in the jokes which he scattered among his pals, and in the wiseacre arguments on politics and religion which he blew forth over his pints at the pub. Oddly enough, he was a hot and voluble conservative, reproducing the arguments of his Sunday paper, and damning all Socialists and agitators. Like Roddy, he did not criticize the order which had created him. He criticized only his boss and his foreman, and sometimes the Jews. Better the lazy peace of loyalty than the trouble of revolt. On religious matters he was a great and sententious talker, damning all atheists and high churchmen.

"There must be a God," he would expound to his mates in foundry or machine shop. "I mean to say, it stands to reason. I mean to say, this bloody drilling machine didn't design and make itself, and then start itself going, did it? And it don't oil and repair itself as far as I know, do it? Well, there you are! No more does the world. When I see that the universe has been running sweetly and without a hitch, ever since it was first clamped into position about forty thousand million years ago, I say there's a darned good engineer behind it somewhere. I mean, use your sense, mate. If only you read a little more, you wouldn't talk so much —— nonsense. I don't mean to say I do all that God and Jesus Christ say I should, but at least I always stand up for 'em."

His laughter and raw jokes had often caused sentimentalists of the employing or welfare-working class to rhapsodize about the "superb humour and balance of the British working man"; but Ernie Warren's jesting didn't quite amount to that. At its source it was less splendid than pathetic. It was his escape, and his only escape. More, it was his only art. The little that was left of the bright boy's creativeness burst out in jets of joking and laughter. Laugh and grow fat. As his spirit shrank, his belly and his buttocks expanded—to his own amusement.

Standing straddle-legged before the fire, he would stroke his paunch, and pat it proudly. "That's me ole gasometer, Mother. I built that out of Old and Mild, I did. And what goes on in there you wouldn't believe, especially after one of your dinners. Gas? Gaw!" Or he would grip each cheek of his rump affectionately, and say, "Gaw, Mother, my backside is getting as big as Auntie Nellie's, and that was no pimple, I can tell you. Never

mind, it's a good British bottom." And he slapped it, ratta-tat-tat. "Good English meat, this: none of your frozen Argentine muck."

Carelessly he begat children; and if they lived, they lived; and if they died, they died. Living by the day, he could not live in his children, and their promise. He had no more hope for them than he had for himself. It would seem, since he repeated the statement so often, that he got a sardonic pleasure from proclaiming to his wife that he had no hope for his children. "Gahn, ole lady! There's no hope for 'em. You can't kid me any longer. Look at *us*. We were both promising nippers enough, but what chah'nst had we? You were pretty enough, and all you got was me and forty bob a week. Crikey, what a prize-packet! And, mind you, I done better than some. I've kep' pretty well in work. You mighta done worse than Ernie, I'll admit. . . . And then look at our Vi."

"Steve isn't doing too badly for himself," retorted the mother.

For Maggie Warren, a little thin, round-backed woman, persevered in hoping good things for her children. A mother can do no less. She must believe that in some respects they are better than others, and that they will be luckier than she. She had borne six children, of whom only two had died; and this was no bad record for her streets. And for those left she still found reason for hope—or at least for three of them. She could no longer hope much for Vi.

Her thoughts this afternoon, as she pushed the dustpan under the scullery sink, were with Fay. Her mind in the brisk minute between thrusting the dustpan away and completing the parade of tea things on the draining board, swept over whole tracts of Fay's life, noting again the reasons for hope. "Little Fay's beautiful; you can't deny that. No one's ever denied that. Looks like hers should get a girl somewhere. *Extraordinarily* beautiful, you might say, in her odd way; everyone's always said she looked different from anyone they ever seen. Remember the Reverend Sullivan, the young minister at St. Anselm's, when Fay was just about rising nine, and how he used to say he was her first lover? Jokingly, of course. My, how that young minister used to go on about her! Why, it was him that gave her her name, really. It was him that first called her Fay. 'No, Mrs. Warren,' he said, in his easy, flattering way—Irish, of course—you can't call a child with a face like that Fanny. There's nothing fanny about her anywhere. No, you've got that wrong, my dear lady. I'm going to call her Fay, for short. She's the most fay person I ever seen. There's something strange and fay looks out of those huge eyes. She must be Irish. I shall never forget'"—Mrs. Warren remembered every word of this—"the first time I seen her at Catechism. I went

back and told Father Foort, I said, "In your parish, Father, you got the loveliest kid in London. I just seen her." Next time I seen her, she was seated on your steps, and I lost my heart for ever. No, Mrs. Warren, I hereby and solemnly re-christen her Fay."

And Fay he had called her, and she had loved it, and refused to be called by anything else; and now everyone called her Fay, forgetting that her name was Fanny. (But her mother remembered often that the name was the certificate of a strange beauty.)

Faster than the busy hands, her thoughts sped on. No doubt she'd been his favourite all the five years he was at St. Anselm's. Like so many of them high church ministers he had been crazy on theatricals, and always he had chosen Fay for a chief part in his pageants and tablo's. Generally he had built his picture around her, you might say; and how often the audience in the Church Room had sighed with admiration to see little Fay standing there with the spotlight shining in her eyes. "Oh, don't she look sweet?" (And how that sigh had gone like a wind through Maggie's heart, causing it to ache with love!) "There's only one person for the part, Mrs. Warren," he used to say, "and it's your Fay with her beautiful grave face and radiant smile." Those were his exact words. Her beautiful grave face and radiant smile. Generally he meant some strange, foreign-looking part, and you couldn't deny that Fay was cut out for them, with her black silk hair like a Jap's and her skin like wax. You'd have said she was a Jap, if it hadn't been for her huge blue eyes.

Mrs. Warren, briskly putting the tea caddy to join the tea things, felt again the ache of love and possession, as she saw Fay, at nine years old, with her bobbed black hair lifting as she skipped about the street, and its fringe dancing raggedly in her eyes.

(To Father Foort the young Father Sullivan had jubilated somewhat differently, "My God, Father, any exotic and historic figure who expresses the immortal longings and incarnates the mystery of being, any wistful child whom Destiny has touched—you know—any really *fey* lady, and I cast Fay Warren for the part! Heavens, how the Pre-Raphaelites would have jumped at her! 'King Cophetua and the Beggar Maid'!" But let us continue with the picture in the long gallery of Maggie Warren's thoughts.)

Joan of Arc in the woods of Domremy—how the people had clapped! Rachel at the Well—very artistic this had been. Pharaoh's Daughter, Esther before Ahasuerus, Ruth in the fields of Boaz—she had all the pink programmes in her top drawer. The boy Joseph binding sheaves with his brethen, Little Saint Elizabeth,

Sister Therese of Lisieux—for the young minister had been very high church indeed. Even the Child Jesus in the Temple—which had seemed “not quite nice,” and you should have heard Ernie on it—but then these high churchmen never seemed to mind that sort of thing—didn’t they say that Father Foort once rode round the church on a donkey on Palm Sunday, till the Bishop stopped him?—and Fay had looked very sweet with the Temple sunrays pouring down on her, and young Mr. Sullivan himself working the spotlight—and one couldn’t help feeling proud.

The tea tray was ready, and she turned to hurry back to the front room. But while walking the six yards from scullery sink to living room table, she met and considered many more thoughts. Sooner or later some nice young fellow with prospects would marry her—a gentleman, perhaps—like Sheila Blunden who was nothing near so pretty and yet was very much the lady now, with a girl to help her and a little car—Gracious! That Sheila had done well for herself, she had!—or perhaps some film director would make her into a star—though one wasn’t sure that one wanted that, even if Fay, shy as she was, could do it; it was a rackety sort of life, by all accounts, and full of temptation; and one wanted Fay to be good. But, all said and done, she was as pretty as that Merle Oberon—prettier, if you arst her, because her eyes were twice the size—and she had every bit as good a figure as that Jessie Matthews—though Fay’s slimness, she sometimes feared, meant that her mother’s milk had been poor, and she’d been kept at the breast too long, and had never really had all the food she ought to have had. And Steve was doing well. If they all did as well as Steve, one couldn’t complain. Steve had gone from garage boy to motor mechanic as quick as say-your-prayers, and he was making good money now—more than his dad. Pity he’d married Gwen and taken his money with him, just as Fay left school, or they could have done much more for her than let her go to that laundry—

“Well, I’m ready if you are.” Now she was speaking to her husband, who had risen and was cleaning his pipe with a wire. “I’ve only just got to straighten myself up a bit.”

“Righto, Ma! Where we going?”

“We might go as far as Lambeth Bridge along the Embankment. I always like that on a lovely day like this. But I got my shopping to do sometime or other.” (And Gracie, though she hadn’t the looks of either Vi or Fay, had taken a prize last term at school, and her writing was lovely. No, Ernie had no call to be so down about them all.)

“Don’t call it the Embankment, Ma. That’s common. The Promenade. The Lambeth Esplanade, if you please.”

“ Did you get Gracie in ? ”

“ No. Never seen so much as her backside.”

“ Oh well, we’ll see her in the street, I suppose. I wonder where Fay went to.”

III

FAY, by this time, was in the South Lambeth Road, walking quickly on her high-heeled shoes. Her heart was pumping nervously; and this, like an accelerated engine, helped to send her along so fast. Her lips were moving: they framed the words, "I'm not expecting anything, I'm not expecting anything. . . ." and "If nothing comes of it, things'll be no worse than before, if nothing comes of it, things'll be no worse than before. . . ."

But if, on the other hand—oh, fancy running home to tell them! Oh, the sparkling triumph of it. She had told them nothing about it because she hoped to surprise them—"Oh, if only I could! But I'm not expecting anything. . . . And if nothing comes of it—" well, this was another reason for not having told them. Pride demanded that she took her disappointment with her into a corner, alone.

Fay was dressed for an event: this anyone could see. She wore a figured red frock of art silk, nude silk stockings and high-heeled patent shoes. A foxaline fur hung low on her shoulders. On her small black head was a lacquer red hat; and her lips had been pencilled to match it. She carried a black patent-leather handbag, and her hands were covered with white fabric gloves; which was as well since they were somewhat swollen and spoiled. So adult was all this finery that it made her look exceedingly childish. She looked about fourteen.

Was she as beautiful as the jubilant young Father declared? Not quite, but nearly. Grease paint over the small blemishes, and a good set of Father Sullivan's spotlight, and she was all that he believed her. The "strangeness" of her beauty lay in the enormous, pensive, night-blue eyes, set in an ivory skin, and framed by black silk hair. They were like large blue grapes. Father Sullivan had left St. Anselm's when she was thirteen, but it is probable, for he was plainly a susceptible young man, that he would have thought her lovelier now at sixteen, with her hair done in a page-boy bob, and her breasts ripening, than at thirteen, when she wore her hair hacked across her forehead, and her figure was as sexless as a boy's. I think that he would have been overthrown if, coming along Tyers Street, he had seen her slip of a figure outlined by a March wind, as it whipped the dust along the gutters, and strained her frock about her.

And I think that, had he renewed the old affectionate relationship, he would have been moved rather poignantly by Fay in this time of her shy adolescence: he would have watched with some reverence, for he was not without vision, her quickening desires, her hurt retreats, her ardent laughter, and her ready tears.

Hers was really a simple nature. The "beautiful, grave face," as he called it, meant only that she lived in secret with simple hopes and fears. This child hastening along the pavement with a thumping heart was a small closed vessel of confidence and fears; and they were driving her to-day. One great confidence, and a hundred fears. The confidence had been the gift of Father Sullivan. It was a confidence in her beauty. Some of his jubilations she had overheard; others her pleased mother had rehearsed to her; and she had taken them into her secret place, and out of them had blossomed her one ambition: a simple ambition: to escape from poverty and commonness, and from her crowding fears, on the raft of her beauty. It was now a fixed ambition. Thus the young Father had set the helm of her life.

But her fears were a mob. A fear of poverty. She had lived so near to the poverty line all her life. Poverty and its ancient sister, Disease, had stalked close behind her, and she had felt their breath. A fear, a horrid and dilating fear, of Tuberculosis. She had seen Ted, her elder brother, shrink to a fevered skeleton and die. She had never forgotten his brilliant eyes, his flushed, transparent skin, and his hot hand. Ted had been a tea packer down by the river, and the dust of the packing room, working on his under-nourished tissue, had begun the insidious demolition; and his crowded home, and his love for Sadie, had done the rest. Finding nowhere to sit and make love, he and Sadie had gone from overheated rooms to dally in chill and humid streets by the river; and quickly the hot and scrawny hand of Tuberculosis had lifted him away from Sadie, and laid him on the clean little bed in the back room, where he had slowly burned away. And now Fay slept with Gracie in the back room where Ted had died. A fear of doing what Vi had done. A fear of becoming like her mother, a thin little housewife with rounded back and knucky hands. And in this last we see her master fear: a fear of losing, by poverty, sickness, hunger, or housework, her only capital of beauty.

She was running from her fears, and towards her hope, as she clicked on her heels along South Lambeth Road.

"But I'm not expecting anything, I'm not expecting anything. . . . If nothing comes of it, things'll be no worse than before, if nothing comes of it, things'll be no worse than before. . . ." But oh, as she said that, she saw the laundry. And her heart dropped, but she dragged it up again, refusing to be defeated.

§

She saw a long hall lit by a glass roof and divided by partitions into sorting room, classifying room, wash-house, drying room, and ironing room. She saw the chipped blue dado round the cream-washed walls. She saw her board in the ironing room, and felt the weight and heat of her gas iron. She breathed the hot atmosphere, smelling of steam and gas and drying linen. She heard the steady, drumming din: an ever-moving backcloth of sound woven of pulsing engines, whirring shafts, slapping belts, and sighing cylinders. She saw herself standing for nine hours on the concrete floor, ironing and folding soft shirts, ironing and folding, ironing and folding, forty shirts an hour. She saw the learners, only fourteen or fifteen years old, and fresh and pink and trim, feeding the Calenders and the pressing machines; and she saw the older women, moving in the steamy atmosphere, heavy-legged, wispy-haired, sag-bodied and shapeless, their bare red heels treading down their slippers. She saw the manager, Mr. Chambers, a genial gentleman, and good to the girls, standing beside her with a visitor and explaining the work. And she heard his words as they moved away. "Oh no, they don't mind the monotony of it. They're not the most intelligent type, the girls in the drying and ironing rooms: mere machines, most of them. Good pay? Well, fair, fair. All we can do, at any rate. Our wages add up to fifty-five per cent. of our gross takings, and on top of them we've got overheads, collection, and delivery. Come and see their mess-room upstairs. No, it's the sorting and packing rooms that need the girls with brains. These kids are mere machines."

Oh, so that was what he thought, was it? And he one of the decent sort, on the whole! Oh, if only she could learn him something to-day! If only!

§

Ah, there it was. Her heart pounded. There, on its corner site, was the Red Domes Cinema. Built before the war, by some architect who believed that the entrance to a picture theatre should look like the portals of a wonderland, it lifted the domes of fantasy, and a façade of dream-stuff, before the drab, dronish prose of London's traffic.

A fairy-tale façade indeed! On either side of a Greek pediment was a dwarf tower supporting a spiked dome like the helmet of a

Royal Marine. The twin domes had once been red, and their spikes gold. Scroll-work and acanthus leaves crowned the pillars which supported the pediment—or pretended to support it, since their chips and cracks revealed that they were plaster. And now, in contrast to this Edwardian festivity, a very modern canopy—as clean and severe in its lines as a sheet of Uncle Vic's empty music paper projected over the pavement. Like the music paper it was ruled with parallel lines; only they were lines of neon lighting. The whole façade had been painted yellow and red at the time of modernization but it needed now a new coat of paint. Behind the shining modern canopy it looked blistered and weary.

To a child of Tyers Street, however, this would be less noticeable than to one who lived where the paint was brighter; and Fay saw the whimsical façade as the gateway which might admit her to-day to a merrier, richer, and more exciting world.

She passed through the swing doors. Everything clean and shining here: no chips or cracks on *this* side of the walls. The large shining vestibule beat upon her nerves, but she called up her forces and repelled its assault with a toss of her head. Empty, except for the uniformed servants at their posts, it looked like a stage-set, just before the curtain rises on a musical comedy. The circle stairs swept up on either side of the cash box; and each flight culminated in an usherette standing at a circle door. Other stairways dipped down into a darkness by the doors of the stalls. In the cash box a uniformed usherette was counting money. On the red and white chessboard floor a doorman stood chatting with another usherette. Fay's eyes swung to the uniform of the girls. It was a cherry-red dress with high upstanding collar and big turned-up cuffs. Collar, cuffs, and bodice were edged with silver. Oh, if only, if only. . . .

The doorman had parted from the usherette, who went tripping down into the darkness; and Fay approached him nervously.

"Excuse me . . ."

But he was looking through the glass doors at the people in the street and did not hear her; and she felt exceedingly foolish. He was a large, powerful, middle-aged man, with small, peering eyes. Merry eyes, she judged, by the lines about them. His uniform was a cherry-red frock coat with silver trimmings, the "contrast colour" of neckband and cuffs being a bright blue. Folded gloves, their white virginity unattempted in all their days, drooped beneath a silver epaulette. A black patent-leather belt held his stomach taut like the hoop of a barrel.

"Excuse me. . . ."

"Oh? Eh?" He turned his face. "Yes miss?" And his voice was very polite: it was oiled with the courtesy due to patrons; but his eyes twinkled down on her mischievously.

"The manager . . . can I . . . could I see him?"

"He was here a minute ago, miss. What was it you wanted?"

"It was about an advertisement——"

"Oh . . . Oh ho! Yurse. . . ." Undoubtedly his manner had changed. It was not less friendly; it was just different, like the contrast colour on his uniform. It had been a soft, syrupy red, and now it was bright blue. She realized that she had been demoted at a breath from patron to accomplice. "Oh, I see, I see, I see. Yes, you go and see him, my dear. I expect he's in his awfice. It's just there behind the cash box."

"Should I . . .? Should I . . .?" Fay was obviously unaware how to introduce herself to a manager.

The doorman braced back his shoulders, and threw forward bent arms as if he were gathering up the difficulty like a sack. "*Cahm* on," he said. "I'll take you along. He's nothing to be frightened about, Mr. Sandars isn't. A very nice gentleman, on the whole—yes, I think so—especially to the girls. So you'd like to work with us, would you?"

"Oh, *yes*!"

"Well, I hope you do, though there's been about twenty young ladies come along in answer to that advert already. Still, they were sights, some of 'em. More like cab horses than anything else. It's wonderful what'll turn up in answer to an advert. That's it. That's the awfice. You might think it was the coal shoot, but it isn't. It's his awfice."

They had come to an open door behind the cash box. If this was the manager's room, it was less a room than a recess in the wall, with a door to it. It was no more than a cupboard, clean and deep, and holding shelves of files, a desk, a chair, and a small safe.

The manager stood bowed over his desk, fingering some papers: a thin, clean-featured man in a neat grey suit. Thirty-five, perhaps.

"Go on," encouraged the doorman, from behind.

But Fay glanced at him despairingly.

"O.K.," said he, with what was meant to be a humorous shrug of acceptance. "I'll introduce you." And he stepped in front of her and said, "Here's another young lady to see you, Mr. Sandars. Come about your advert."

Mr. Sandars did not look up. "All right," he grunted, and continued his studies, licking a thumb to turn over a sheet. "Yes-s-s-s," he murmured to the sheet before him, and "Oh damn!" whereupon he turned back several sheets and, picking up a pencil, scratched his head with it. And once more he licked his thumb to go through the sheets again.

The doorman, out of his view, bowed satirically for Fay's entertainment; spread his hands as much as to say, "Well, there you

are, miss. That's his mood at the moment "; and strolled back to his door.

And Fay waited there, with a heart knocking and missing as if there were air in its valves.

And then, after a time, Mr. Sandars pushed the papers aside, tossed down the pencil, and turned to look at her.

She was standing in the brightness of the vestibule which was full of the afternoon sun. Not one of his features moved, but she knew that her appearance had startled and pleased him. She could read nothing more in that thin, clean, undemonstrative face; and it is as well, perhaps, that she couldn't.

For Mr. Sandars had no sooner seen her than he had decided. One flashing appraisal of her face and form, and he had decided that this was the girl to draw the gentlemen patrons. And he had decided also that she must not know of this decision—not for some time, at any rate. First, because he didn't want her to be too sure of herself. They were saucy little sluts, sometimes, these lovelies; and if you gave them a high opinion of themselves, they got altogether too uppish. Secondly, because if you teased and played your fish, you hooked it more securely. And thirdly, because he always enjoyed wielding his power over a soft, desirable girl. Not that he ever wanted to be unkind to his prettier girls; their desirability disarmed him too much for that; but, since any overt liberty would cost him his job, he found in this wielding of his power a pale substitute for the caressings and the fondlings that his hands longed to give them.

"Oh well, come in," he said as colourlessly as a good business man should. "Is it about the usherette job?"

"Yes, sir. I saw your advertisement in the *South London*——"

But Mr. Sandars liked to do the talking. "Done anything in this line before?"

"No, sir."

"Well, that's a pity. I—I rather wanted an experienced girl. How old are you?"

"Just on seventeen, sir."

"You don't look it. You don't look anything like it. Are you sure you are? I don't want any hanky-panky, you know."

"I'm seventeen my next birthday."

"And what's your line been up to now?"

"I've been working at the Thames Swan Laundry."

"Where?"

"The Thames Swan Laundry."

"Oh." His accent was designed to show her that this was no recommendation.

"I was a shirt and collar finisher," explained Fay, hoping that he would realize that this was a more responsible job than some.

"And why have you left?"

"I haven't left. I thought I would, if I could get this job."

"And that means you wouldn't be free for a week, I suppose. Well, I don't think that's going to be much use to me. I'm wanting someone at once. I've just lost an excellent girl through illness. She's had to go into hospital. One of the best and most reliable girls I ever had—a very difficult person to replace." He was enlarging on her quality, so that Fay might feel humble. "No, I'm sorry. I'm afraid I really want someone who can start on Monday, and who's had some experience."

And then he saw tears in Fay's eyes, and loved her more. And was more than ever resolved to have her about his theatre, where he could sometimes exercise his power on her, and see her eyes swell with tears.

"I could come on Monday if—if there was any chance of your taking me."

"Why, how's that?" he fired at her.

"I could just stay out from the laundry. I'm not bound to go back. Girls often stay out."

"Do they? My gracious, we don't do things like that here. We expect proper notice here. I don't want any girls who're going to walk out on me just when they feel inclined."

And again he saw a pain in the child's eyes as she perceived that she had said something wrong.

"No, I see that. . . ."

"Well, I've several other girls to consider. There've been about thirty applications already for the post. I can't say anything definite for the present. Still, let's have a look at you, now you're here."

"What?"

"Let's have your hat off, and that fur."

Fay removed the hat and the fur, and patted her hair into place. Mr. Sandars looked her up and down, with special reference to her legs. Then, putting a guiding hand on her shoulder, as was surely legitimate, he said, "Yes. Well, just turn round." And she turned, and he removed his fingers reluctantly. He studied her back view, and would have loved to pass his hand over that round black head. Yes, a very neat little person indeed; the perfect figure for an usherette. One or two of the other applicants had been pretty, especially that impish little blonde, but they seemed nothing now, compared with this one. How secure her without appearing to want her particularly? "All right," he said.

And she turned her face again, with her large anxious eyes.

"Do you think you'd like the work here?"

"Oh, I'm *sure* I should."

"Why?" he snapped like the click of a pistol.

"I think it'd be awfully interesting. I like the cinema."

"But you can't be looking at the pictures all the time, you know."

"No, I didn't mean that. I meant——"

But, luckily for Fay, who really didn't know what she meant, Mr. Sandars broke in, "Twenty-five bob a week is all we can offer. I suppose you understand that. How much did you get at your laundry?"

"It depended rather. I was a pieceworker. Sometimes I made more than that. Usually a little more—usually about four-and-six a day."

"Well, that's all we can offer. This isn't one of your West End houses. You'd have to take it or leave it. It's at least regular, and you'd make a little more sometimes. You get four and a tanner—four-and-sixpence—extra on bank holidays, and one-and-sixpence if there are children's matinees on Saturday mornings. We have 'em quite often."

"Oh yes. . . ." He thought she looked pleased.

"Well, I don't think I can say anything final just now. I've several other girls to consider, and there'll be probably more coming in."

"I see." Now her face had lost some of its light, as if a gauze curtain had fallen.

He picked up the pencil and beat it on the desk. "But I don't know. . . . The fact that you can come on Monday is a lot in your favour. Anyhow, let's have your name and address." And he pulled a scribbling block towards him.

Fay dictated.

"Oh, Tyers Street, is it? Uhm. . . ." Then her circumstances were poor. He felt glad, because it increased his and the job's power over her. Best let her know that he didn't think much of her street. "Uhm. . . . Tyers Street. . . . Where did you go to school?"

"At St. Peter's, sir."

"Eh? Where's that?"

"St. Peter's, in Gye Street."

"Oh yes. A church school, isn't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Uhm. . . ." He beat a tattoo with the pencil, first on the desk, and then on his teeth. "Look here. Supposing I offer you this job, do you really mean you could come on Monday?"

"Oh yes. Yes, I could do that."

"Well, as I say, it's a great point in your favour. A great point. I don't understand it, but it's no business of mine. It's their funeral. My business is to get a girl here by Monday. H'm

... H'm ... don't know what to say about it. ... " And suddenly he swung round and said, "Do you know, I'm disposed to give you a try-out. I am, really."

No answer from Fay, but the lights in her face were unveiled again, though they flickered a little, as if unsure.

"Yes. Could you be here at a quarter to one on Monday?"

"Oh, yes. Yes, sir."

"No, wait a minute." Instant extinction of the lights—what a child she was, with no power to control emotion, or mask it! And it had been quite unwarranted, this moment of dismay, because he had only hesitated before adding, "There's your uniform, you see. Miss Dixon's won't do, I'm afraid. You'd better come along in the morning about ten-thirty, and we'll see if we can fit you."

"Oh, yes."

"Right." And he gave her at last a pleasant and encouraging smile. "Come along on Monday, and we'll see what happens."

"Oh, *thank* you!"

"Good-bye, then, Miss—Miss Warren."

"Good-bye, sir; and thanks most awfully."

The heart that Fay carried across the vestibule was more like a pocket of pulsing air than a heart. People were pouring into the theatre now, and she pitied them. They belonged to the outside of the swing doors, she to the inside. They belonged to the un-uniformed multitude: civilians. Passing through the swing doors, she felt as if she were crossing a frontier into a land of yesterday. The big doorman was standing on the steps now, with his thumbs in his belt, and he turned his head to twinkle a tiny eye at her and ask, "Wha' did 'e say?"

"I'm coming! Oh, isn't it heavenly? He says he'll give me a trial."

The doorman nodded profoundly. "I thought he would. Yurse, I rather thought he would. Pleased?"

"Lor, yes! *Course* I am! I'm *thrilled*. I could *dance*."

"Well, you'll like us alright: at first, at any rate, till you get above yourself and want to go somewhere else." He jerked his head towards Mr. Sandars' office. "What do you think of Himself?"

Fay grimaced slightly. "Rather stand-offish and cold-looking, I thought. A pity, because he must have been quite a pretty baby."

"Lummy! Now that's an idea that's never occurred to me, not in all the time I been with him. It'd take a woman to think of that. So that's what you were thinking, was it? ... Yes, I suppose his mother loved him ... But I tell you what: I don't think you'll find him stand-offish, nor cold either, in a week

or two. Not where *you* are concerned." He winked. "In a sense, yes; and in another sense, no. He has to mind his p's and q's, of course. Well, so long, dear; and I'll see that you behave yourself. You can tell your father I'll be a father to you."

IV

THE doorman was right when he said that she would be happy at first. She was buoyantly happy. It was lovely to have her mornings free ; lovely to wear that red and silver uniform instead of a washed-out overall ; lovely to wield an electric torch, light as air, instead of a heavy gas iron ; lovely to feel a pilot's authority over the people as they came in, to escort them down the gangways, her consciousness of her neat uniform putting a neatness into her feet, and to stop and throw a beam on the seats she had found for them. It was like a game. And it was lovely to have long, easy hours when she could sit and dream.

The first five hours were easy. At a quarter to one she ran down the side of the cinema to the staff room to put on her uniform. The staff room was as primitive as the auditorium was elaborate. It was, in fact, a wooden hut in the yard. The Dormy Hut, the girls called it. It had a table, a few stiff chairs, a rusting electric stove, a gas-ring, and the lockers for the uniforms. Shops Act notices, pinned to the walls, proclaimed the Government's concern that Female Assistants should sit as much as possible, and the few odd chairs were the concession of Business to the Law. Pictures of film stars, both male and female, cut from the journals and hung all round the walls, represented the ardours of the girls. When the seven girls (five usherettes and two cashiers) had got one another into uniform, with much jostling and more cackling, they ran up the yard and into the unopened vestibule for the parade. The whole uniformed staff formed up like soldiers ; men to the right, girls to the left ; two ushers, one doorman, two cashiers, five usherettes. And Mr. Sandars inspected them all like an orderly officer. He looked at the girls' hair, which had to be tidy ; at their hands, which had to be clean ; at their stockings, which had to be light ; and at their shoes, which had to be black.

At a quarter to one the doorman unbolted the doors and, if the sun was shining, threw them wide ; and in her first days (and in her nice uniform) Fay always thought this an exciting moment. The cashier went into the cash box ; the usherettes went to their

posts ; someone or other telephoned to the projection room ; and the house filled with music.

The first patrons, mostly children, came in.

At half-past one the house lights faded and died, the "non-sink" music abruptly stopped, and the music proper to the film brayed forth. Now began the slackest two hours of all. Seldom were many in the house ; and, as it was a rule that an usherette might sit on an end seat, provided there was no one else in the row, Fay could often sink into a tip-up chair and, if she had watched the film before, read a book surreptitiously. How in a dark auditorium ? She did not use her usherette torch, because the girls were ordered to make their batteries last a month, but she used a very small one of her own, playing it on the page when no one was near to see, and switching it off on the approach of Mr. Sandars. This was easy, because the theatre had no gangway behind circle or stalls, so that Mr. Sandars, though he often looked in to see that the girls were not, as he put it, "miking about," had to push open the door and announce his entry, as might an angel, with a moment of light from another world.

Any time after three she and perhaps two other girls might be granted their tea-time. They ran together to the Dormy Hut and spent an agreeable three-quarters of an hour, making their tea, drinking it, eating the bread and butter which they had brought with them, chattering with full mouths, and screaming with laughter. One might have supposed that a few hard chairs, a scrap of carpet, and a rusty electric stove, were inadequate equipment for happiness, but the children of Tyers Street and its sisters do not look for much comfort in this world.

Tea-time over, they ran back through the sunlight or the rain to relieve the other girls.

And then from six o'clock the real trade began. Little rest from six to nine. Fay either stood at the doors to take and tear the tickets, or she escorted the people down the gangways, her light bobbing ahead of them like a *fata morgana*. Her eyes grew used to the darkness like a cat's, so that she wondered why people stumbled at the steps, or missed the entrance to a row. If for a few minutes the light flooding in from the doors did not call her to her task, she would stand in that dim cavern of fantasy, and seeing nothing of the cloud of ghostly strangers around her, and hearing little of the swaying, silken music, would drown in her own dreams ; to be summoned back to life, perhaps, by the Interval, when the house lights, going up, turned the darkness into a golden twilight, and the curtains whispered across the screen, and people rose and sidled from their seats, she running to the doors to usher them out into the poor pedestrian world.

But, once their novelty was lost, these duties in the darkness and thick smoke became a weariness, and she preferred the doors. At the doors she stood in the light and saw the quick arrested glances of the men. She felt the eyes that devoured her: sometimes they were young eyes, sometimes middle-aged, and sometimes quite old. She heard voices speaking of her beauty as they passed down the stairs. In the darkness she was extinguished; in the light she was on view.

And in the darkness, sometimes, there were hurts and humiliations. Boys "got fresh" with her, and used her for a joke. They shouted after her, "When can I have a date with you, miss?" and, "'Ere, come and sit 'ere, miss, and I'll warm you up." On Sunday nights they were particularly fresh. Sunday seemed to bring out all that was beastly in them. On Sundays they even smacked or stroked her behind as it passed in the darkness; and if she complained of the "horrid things" to Mr. Sandars, he said only, "Oh, they don't mean much. It's just their fun. But let me know if they go further"; and she wondered what he meant by "further."

In the light she was protected from these humiliations, and yet she was on view, and one day, perhaps . . .

For this child, with her many fears and her one hope, was hunting. She was scanning the future for a lover—was he not her most likely saviour? Indeed, her coming to the Red Domes Cinema was a drawing of a covert in the long search for him. She was hunting—or she was offering herself as a quarry to one who would come hunting.

After half-past eight the house "eased up." Nearly all the seats were filled, and she could take her half-hour for supper, which was tea and a pie in the staff-room or a ham roll at a neighbouring snack bar.

Then from nine o'clock all was very quiet. The "early girls" had gone home; the audience was finally built; and there was little to do but aid, by opening the doors, its slow disintegration.

Ten-forty-five was the dramatic moment. Ten-forty-five was as good as a game. The music lifted like a breaker and crashed for the last time on the darkness; the lights rose into life again; the audience rose to its feet; and she flung wide the exit doors, click on the minute. The people thronged past her. The men gave their last looks at her, and she stood haughtily indifferent—though she was standing there to be seen. Soon the house was empty; and the girls checked up on all parts—stall rows, circle rows, orchestra pit, and toilettes—looking for lost articles or left people. Then running through the blue night to the staff-room to put off her uniform, and so home on tired feet

to the real supper which her mother was always diligent to provide.

Such was Fay's day during the last months of her seventeenth year. Such was the gilded frame in which she was offered, and offered herself, to who would come and buy.

V

THERE was plenty of time. She was still only seventeen, and sometimes found it difficult to remember that she was more than twelve. For the present she was happier in dreaming of her future triumph than in doing anything to create it. There was plenty of time.

The triumph that she pondered, standing in her red uniform at the exit doors, was quite small. Merely to escape out of privation and commonness into elegance. Not into nobility; she was too shy for that. Great houses and great ladies would frighten her. To be loved by a really nice boy who was a real gentleman but not too rich; to love him as the film heroines loved; to live in an "artistic" little home with its own garden; to have a girl to do the work (perhaps two); and to send all her washing to the laundry. To be a fine, envied customer of the laundry instead of its common slave. She had seen just the kind of house she would like in quiet streets on the nice clean hills of Tooting or Norwood.

But at present one thing and another kept her standing at her door with her dream. Never did she see a boy with whom she would wish to walk away. None of the young fellows who stared at her, or came fishing for her favours, was a real gentleman. And the more forward they were, the less she liked them. Her vanity, or, in kinder terms, her confidence in her capital of beauty, her one great confidence, forbade her to "make herself cheap." It was deeply wounded when they "got fresh" with her or "made too free" with her. And here was a dilemma. Her hero would treat her with too much respect to speak to her, and she would be too refined to speak to him; so how were they to come together? And then the hours of an usherette tended to shut away the girls from friendships with boys in the world beyond the cinema. As Lucy Hayward, her best friend, explained most earnestly in the Dormy Hut, "One hasn't a chah'nst, reely, to get off with a nice boy, or to keep him if you get him. What I mean to say is, he can only see you on your off-days, or after nine on your early nights, and you can't go out with him on Saturdays and Sundays—or bank holidays—well, I mean to say, what fellow's going to put up with it? They just get sick and tired of it. It's only natural, reely."

And Fay nodded, but felt that her young man, when he came, would have to love her too well to be beaten by things like that.

And she continued to look out for him, from her place in the gangway or at the exit doors, and she did not see him; and she was unworried. Quietly happy in her new job, she could wait.

She liked the other girls, for there was much goodwill and little malice in her, and, anyhow, she knew she was prettier. Secure in this knowledge, she was poor soil for the petty jealousies of the staff-room. If a girl turned sulky and complained to Mr. Sandars about being left too long in the sixpennies, Fay would offer to exchange places with her, declaring that it was "all the same to her which price she did"; and the other girls would agree together "what a reely sweet little thing she was, with no side to her at all."

She had a further security in the manager's affection for her, repressed and evasive though it was. She was not so simple as not to perceive that he was attracted by her and liked, so far as his position allowed, to touch and handle her. She understood what was meant by his alternate petting and bullying. It was plain that he enjoyed calling her "child," and adjusting her high collar with a fond smile, or commenting sympathetically on her white cheeks and dark eyes, and assuring her, with a glance at her arms, wrists, and calves, that she was getting thin, and she mustn't; and hardly less plain that, at other times, he enjoyed being cold with her, and calling her "Miss Warren" or "Miss," and rebuking her for "miking about." And to the blandishments she responded with lively, even pert, answers; and to the chiding with pouts; and both performances she enjoyed.

"Well, child," he would say, meeting her in the corridor to the stage, "are you liking it here?"

"Oh, I'm *loving* it, Mr. Sandars!" she would answer with a skip, and with her lamps at full power. "Just loving it." In her speech she always exaggerated her enthusiasms. "I'm liking it better than any place I ever been."

"Better than the Father Thames Laundry?"

"The Thames *Swan* Laundry. What do *you* think?"

"But why?"

"Oh, this is *interesting*. This is *fun*."

"Don't you get tired of it sometimes?"

"Oh, yes, of course, but one gets bored with anything sometimes."

"You'd rather be here than in any other job?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Everyone kind to you?"

"Yes, *ever* so."

"That's right, that's right." And he gave her a little pat of encouragement, very pleasant for both.

But at another time it was: "Come out here, Miss Warren. Good God, haven't you ever heard that the girls are not to sit on the arm of the end seat—not if there's a single person in the row? Surely the rule's plain enough? And what the hell's all that litter in the gangway? It looks more like a street market than a cinema. I don't know what you're accustomed to at home, but I want this place kept reasonably tidy."

And Fay, tossing her head, answered with a look if not with words, "Well, at least I'm not accustomed to being sworn at at home"; and turned from him. And he went on down the staircase, and she slammed through into the dark gangway; both stimulated—quite pleasantly.

And so the days, holding enough of interest, travelled by, till at last something happened.

§

It was in a week when a big picture, just released, and first secured for the neighbourhood by the Red Domes, was drawing the South Londoners through the doors as a new sump draws the rainfall. Crowds streamed through the swing doors; queues waited outside; and the big doorman strutted between the crowds and the queues, directing, marshalling, shepherding. Once or twice he even had the distinction of yelling, with a voice like a doomsday trumpet, for a private car or a taxi. Buskers appeared in the gutters, like djinns out of the mud, and sang or fiddled or tore newspapers prettily, for the diversion of the queues. And the red domes above seemed alight with pride; nay, with no great effort of the imagination you could think that the lines of neon lighting along the canopy were one broad grin.

Not for months had the Red Domes done such business. They ran the picture for the whole week; and for the first four days it drew capacity, or near capacity, houses. And many of the faces in the packed audiences, and many of the clothes too, so the usherettes noticed, belonged to the comfortable suburbs on the hills.

On the Friday evening, at about half-past eight, Fay stood on duty at the circle door. The flights of stairs and the broad vestibule at their feet, were empty at last: it was unlikely that many more people would disturb their quiet, for the Interval was past. The audience was built, and the house was full, except for a few two shilling seats: these two shilling seats were down at the front of the circle, three rows of them, and only the biggest pictures,

and the biggest nights, filled them. She could hear the clink of money in the cash box as Daisy Bryant piled up the coins. The doorman stood on the pavement beyond the closed doors, soothing his tired mind by a soporific contemplation of the world going by.

And suddenly, as Fay stood there, a small group of people burst through the doors with back-chat and laughter. A group of five people. Fay, very weary now, and longing to sit down, would hardly have considered them, had it not been for a remarkable old gentleman in their midst. He looked so distinguished with his wide-brimmed grey hat, and his shrubs of silver hair fuzzing out beneath it, and his large-featured, whimsical face, that she fell to studying him and his family—for they were a family, no doubt. There were himself, a middle-aged woman, two young men, and a girl. His wife had achieved that curious likeness, or assimilation, to him which was so often the result of thirty years' living together. She too had thick grey hair, though hers was bobbed and hung down, while his stuck out like the brushwood round an elm. Like him she was big in breast and shoulders, though not so tall. Like him she was dressed in black; and if she had not his stately, flat-footed, shoulders-back tread, her movements had the refinement (in Fay's view) of a lady. Leading the party, and the liveliest member of it, was a young man in powerful spectacles, with black wavy hair that crisped into curls—a type of young man that Fay always disliked, because in her experience, the more perfect the waves in a dark young man's hair, the more sensual and saucy he was. This youth was very well dressed, with his wing collar, black coat, and striped trousers: a young solicitor, she guessed, or a young financier from the City. The girl was smartly dressed too; and Fay studied her more carefully than the others. From the cut of her clothes, and the set of her hair, with its artificial curls massed under her small hat, she judged that this was a young lady with money to spend. A pretty, but very hard, young lady, she thought. Of the second young man she noticed little at first, except that he was the youngest of them, probably about nineteen or twenty, and that he was less elaborately, though still nicely, dressed, with his grey flannel trousers, pull-over, and sports coat. Perhaps he was still at college.

The dark young man, bell-wether of his flock, ran and slid to the cash box, joked with Daisy Bryant, took his tickets, and turned to the others.

"Kindly note, everybody: this has cost me ten bob. Ten whole bob. Here, do listen, Dad. I consider it's very gentleman-like of me. Very gentlemanlike indeed. In fact, it's a damn sight more gentlemanlike than suits me."

"Not so much gas, Gilly," interrupted the other boy. "The big picture'll be starting. Get a move on."

"Gas! Gas, everybody! Did you hear that? He gets a free two-shilling ticket, and all he can say is Gas. Well, all I know is, it may be gentlemanlike, but I shan't do this sort of thing again. I find it too great a strain. Anybody like to help me out with this? Anybody like to contribute? You, Belle? You, Dad?"

"I understood it was an invitation," said the old man, with a kind of mock-pompous formality. "Or, to employ the atrocious word which I think you used, an invite. 'An invite'! Good God! I've been hoping, all the way here in the tram, that you only used the word in a spirit of low comedy. 'Invite'! It stinks of the——"

"Nothing coming from him, evidently. You, Roddy? Oh, damn you all for a mean crowd. Yes, it was an invite, and I wish now it hadn't been; but I should have thought that some of you'd have had the decency to offer something. Ten bob! My hat! Well, make the most of it, people. You won't get it again. I'm quite cured of doing the gentleman: it hurts too much, and you're not worth it, anyway. Come along, all." And he began to prance up the stairs that led to Fay. "Come along, Mum. Hustle your husband along. Give him a shove up behind, Belle."

"Do behave yourself, Gilly," protested his mother.

"I will not be hurried," announced the old gentleman, ascending the stairs with his curious gait, so deliberate and stately: large feet turned out, chest thrown forward, and spine so erect that it seemed to lean backwards. "I have never allowed myself to be hurried. The great thing on these occasions is to keep calm. All my life I've tried to impress that upon your mother, but——" but at that moment his ascending eye fell upon Fay, and his calm was somewhat disturbed. Not so old, this strutting old beau, that he could not take a stab at the sight of beauty which was not for him. His eye savoured her steadily, and quite unashamedly, as he tramped the remaining stairs.

All this time the girl with the curls had just followed behind the others, saying nothing.

The dark young man was now at Fay's side, handing her the tickets. "Has the big picture started yet, miss?"

"No, there's a short on at the moment, sir. The big picture starts in about three minutes."

So saying, she tore the tickets, returned him his halves, and was pushing open the door, when she became conscious that the younger man was staring at her. Swinging her eyes to him, she met his look.

It was a look she knew well: had she not met it a thousand times and more in the last year? But somehow in this boy's eyes it was tenderer. It was as if his admiration and desire had melted immediately into tenderness. And it was more sudden

and more final; as if the shock behind it had been sharper, and the wound after it more lasting. Fay let her glance meet his for a second longer than she had ever let it meet anyone's before, because his face, with its rather childish features pleased her, and she thought it kind. Then both turned their eyes away.

And the family passed through into the darkness, and the door closed on them.

§

His look had wounded Fay, too. The boy was not her ideal, because, alas! our ideals do not come incarnate to our doors; but he came nearer to it than most of the hundreds who had passed her before, in gangway, vestibule, or street. First, because he was both good-looking and kind-looking; and secondly, because he was obviously a member of a family who were ladies and gentlemen. Anyone could see that they were of a different class from the usual patrons of the Red Domes. They did not come from the streets of Vauxhall, South Lambeth, or Kennington. Their voices were quieter than the voices in Tyers Street, and their accent different. The old father looked like some celebrated poet or artist. And they had taken two shilling seats.

Oh, supposing this was he . . . Standing there alone, she began to build her dreams.

It was very quiet in the vestibule now. The doorman had disappeared into the gentlemen's cloakroom, where he kept his ordinary clothes and doubtless a book or a paper. Daisy Bryant was silent in her cash box: she must be reading. The usherette at the circle door opposite had gone into the auditorium. All the doors everywhere were swung to, and nothing came through them except the smothered music and voices from the screen, and the muted rumble of traffic in the roads.

Fay idled with her fancies for a space, and then stepped into the auditorium, whose enclosed air was now so hot that it seemed the very darkness had been heated like the load in an oven. Mary Canby's torch answered the triangle of light from her door, and, stepping softly towards it, she stayed whispering and giggling with Mary, but peering all the time into the darkness to descry where that family was sitting. There they were, in the third row from the bottom, the younger boy in the end seat. Leaving Mary, she walked down the whole length of the gangway to its foot, and pretended to look over the balcony at the stalls below. For a minute she left herself there, not six yards from the boy, standing with her arms folded self-consciously behind her, the hands grasping the elbows. She was standing there to be seen

of him, and she knew that his gaze was turned on her like a torch.

After a minute she turned and ran up the steps as neatly, and as innocently, as she could.

And outside the door she waited for the end. It came with the last crash of music, and she flung wide her doors, and stood beside them to let the outflow of hot air and chattering people pour past her to the stairs, like a mill-pond released. Among them he passed; and he looked at her again; and she pretended not to see. But her eyes followed him down the stairs; and once he turned his head and trapped them. She blushed and busied herself with one of the strings on which she had threaded her half-tickets. And he passed through the swing doors and out into the dark world from which he had come. And she wondered if, like so many of the others, he had passed from her knowledge for ever.

§

But he came again. He came a few days later, and this time he was alone. He sat at the back of the circle and watched her. And thereafter he came at least once a week; sometimes twice. Having discovered, as far as he could, when she was in the circle and when in the stalls, he sat where she would be. And so he became a joke in the staff room and on the stairs.

"He's here again, Fay!" they would exclaim.

And she: "Who? My little man?"

"Yes, he's sitting in the back row of the circle, as per usual, where he can have a good view of you."

"Oh, I must go and have a look at him. Is he in his dinky little brown suit?"

"No, he's in a brand new blue suit which he's brought along to show you."

"Yes, Fay, and a bright blue shirt to match it; and, my dear, he's got a blue handkerchief tucked into his pocket, and all!"

"Oh, how sweet! How perfectly *adorable*."

Or the excited colloquy might run: "He's arrived, Fay! Your boy's arrived. Oh, go on, Fay. Give him a spot of encouragement. Have a heart. If he's afraid to say anything to you, say something to him. You'll never get anywhere at this rate. And he's beginning to look like a dying duck after all these weeks of love and longing."

"Bless him! I think he's a lamb."

"Well, make a date with him, Make it to-night."

"*That* I shan't! What do you think I am?"

"I think you're quite a lot sweet on him, I do, really!"

"Oh, *do* you? *Do* you? Well, I think you think you're quite a lot cleverer than you are. So there!"

"All right: don't get into a paddy. All I mean is, you'll never get nowhere at this rate."

"I'm not sure that I want to get anywhere. I'm perfectly happy, as I am, thanks very much. Ta, all the same. Ta, ever so."

And she skipped away into the secrecy of her own thoughts.

For he certainly conformed to her ideal in that he was too refined to speak to her. Or to be seen looking at her, if her eyes turned towards him. And it was a fact that he came to the cinema thirty times without doing more than watch her in the darkness; and that the thirty times, together with the refined and respectful intervals between them, composed six months. But both were quite happy in the long, uneventful vigil and watch, because both were young and felt rich in time. He, she knew, was happy, sitting alone and watching her; and she was happy, tripping down the gangway, or leaving herself by the door, to be seen of him. They were half in love with each other, and the darkness, like their diffidence made tangible, hung between them. She liked him for his diffidence, and was pleased with her own proper behaviour. What would come into their lives to disperse that diffidence neither knew, nor troubled for the present to consider.

It came one Saturday night. A crowd crammed the theatre from the back row of the circle, where the watcher sat, to the sixpennies near the orchestra pit, where the children fidgeted and shouted and laughed. Under the heavy darkness the audience looked like a slag heap of faces—a smouldering slag heap, with pipe bowls and cigarettes glowing on its surface, and grey shreds of smoke rising from it. It gave off a cloud of animal heat, as it simmered with whispering, crackled with wit, or exploded into communal laughter. The second-feature film, now showing, was a bawdy affair, full of pyjamas and bedclothes and suggestiveness; and the young men, well stirred up, were shouting lickerish comments or providing the noise of kisses whenever the lips of the artistes met; and the girls were shrieking out their shock and delight. Their gasps leapt like sparks from the heap: "Oh, I say!" "Well, I *never*!" and "*There* now!" And their boys cuddled them closer, to support them in their embarrassment.

It was nine o'clock. Fay had shown the last of the people to their seats, and was standing near the door. She was tired, and when, by happy chance, an end seat near her became vacant, she sat on its arm. She was not watching the familiar film: she was studying at intervals the dim profile of the boy only a few

yards away. When his full face turned towards her, as it often did, a moon in the darkness, she dropped her eyes to her lap or shot them to the screen.

And then she sprang up guiltily. The door had opened—opened softly, as by a practised hand; and she guessed that the splash of light heralded the manager. It did. Mr. Sandars' head and shoulders appeared, and his face swung, as he probed the darkness for someone. He saw Fay and whispered, "Ah, Miss Warren! Come here. Come out here a minute; I want you. Hurry, girl, hurry."

Her heart beating anxiously, she slipped through the open door, which fell to behind her, stifling abruptly the music and voices of the auditorium. Her startled eyes scanned Mr. Sandars' face.

"Look here," he said. "Miss Kennard's had to go home—overcome by the heat, or something. I nearly had her fainting on me, and I've sent her home. She's been looking like nothing on earth all day. There's thunder about, I think, don't you?—it feels like it—but you'll have to take on the ices, see. Yes," he added quickly and with some discomfort, since he knew she would resist the suggestion, "I want you to do it. And you must look sharp. This picture hasn't long to run now."

"Oh . . ." began Fay.

"Yes, hurry up. Come along with me."

"Oh, I don't think I want to do that," pleaded Fay, standing still. "Wouldn't one of the other girls——"

"No, one of the other girls wouldn't. I haven't asked them. I want *you* to do it. There's nothing to it at all, my dear. You'll do it beautifully. You're the very one for it."

"Oh, Mr. Sandars . . . No, I'd rather not."

"Nonsense. Come along, child; there's no time to stand here and argue. You'll like it all right, and don't forget, you little silly, there's the commission."

"I don't want the commission——"

"Oh, for hell's sake, come along, and don't be absurd! Some girls'd jump at the chance." And he touched her on the shoulder, as if that would start her, and, putting his palm on the small of her back, guided her down the stairs.

Her distress was warming into anger, and anger burning up into fury, as he deployed her at will in this fashion; and at the staircase foot she separated herself sharply from that paternal palm and turned to face him, her eyes darting flame.

"I don't see why I should do it if I don't want to. And please don't push me there. I'm an usherette, not an ice girl. I don't think it's fair of you to force me into it, if I don't want to—a girl has some right to decide what she's going to do and what she isn't. Can't you get——?"

"All right." Mr. Sandars' lips set tight; his eyes surveyed her sullen face; they seized her own eyes and held them; and she knew that pleasure was possessing him: the pleasure of casting away gentleness and lifting a whip. "All right. Let me down, if you want to. I don't mind; only I confess I don't care much for girls who decline to help me in an emergency. Honestly I don't, my young woman. I don't like them about the place, because I don't know where I am with them. Now please say definitely whether you'll do it or not, and then I shall know where I stand. We shall all know where we stand."

There was no misunderstanding the threat. Either she danced to his whip like a slave, or she would be tortured through the next days with the fear of dismissal. Dismissal! The end of her happy tasks at the Red Domes, and—she saw it suddenly—the end, the untimely end, of the happy courtship which for weeks and weeks had filled with happiness the darkness of the Red Domes. An abrupt and final end to the sweet, engrossing game: his slow and silent approach to her, her elusive and tripping invitation to him, and their hours of wordless communion in the darkness. Oh, Mr. Sandars had known only too well that the threat of dismissal would sting her into obedience. Had she not told him again and again that she was happier in his cinema than she had ever been? Yes, he had all the power; and she must surrender.

"I want to help all I can. I try to. But——"

"Yes, yes, yes, but cut all that out now, for hell's sake. Are you going to do it or not? Hell blast it, girl, don't you realize that I've only about two minutes and a half in which to get someone else? Say one way or the other, can't you?"

"Well, I suppose I must do it this time, but I shan't have to do it often, shall I? Not again?"

"No, no, no, no, no. That's right, my dear. Now come along." And he replaced his palm in position, forgivingly. "You'll make a lovely little ice girl—ten times better than Millie Kennard. What a silly little fibbertigibbet you are! There's nothing to panic about. Absolutely nothing."

Millie Kennard, for some months now, had combined the duties of chocolate girl and ice girl. That is to say, she had spent most of her time wandering up and down the gangways in a spruce white coat with an illuminated tray of chocolates, but three times each day—immediately after the second feature—she had changed from chocolate girl to ice girl, and made a spectacular entrance before the audience, a spotlight fetching her from a door near the stage and escorting her to the front of the orchestra pit, while appetizing phrases appeared on the screen and triumphant music endorsed them.

No doubt it was a compliment to be chosen for this duty, since Mr. Sandars wanted nothing but sex appeal in his spotlight; but the truth was that none but the stage-struck girls cared for it. The others recoiled from the spotlight. Fay, for example, liked to show herself to the world, but there was a point where the desire for self-display came into conflict with her self-consciousness. And beyond that point her self-consciousness shivered her. The right amount of publicity gratified her; its excess was terrifying. To stand out from the crowd, yes; but to occupy such a dazzling isolation as this, oh no, *no*.

Mr. Sandars' palm was pushing her down the stairs, and she trembled beneath it, like a mouse beneath the paw of a cat. Stage-fright thumped in her heart and broke her breath.

"Now run and get Miss Kennard's coat," encouraged Mr. Sandars. "It's in the staff room, and I'll wait for you by the refrigerator, see. I'll show you everything you have to do; don't worry." And he gave her a last cheery pat.

She ran down the yard to the Dormy Hut, took Millie's white coat from its hook, and ran back with it on her arm, thinking in her confusion that she could put it on over her uniform. Entering by the stage door, with the cold sweat starting on her forehead, she turned into a dark, bare corner by the stage where, big as an altar tomb, stood the refrigerator, with Millie's tray resting on its top. Mr. Sandars stood at its side, beating an impatient toe on the boards. The roar of the amplifiers behind the screen, and the thought that only this frail screen and the flimsy tabs separated her from that vast hillside of faces shook her from head to heel. The mechanical indifference of the voices in the loud speakers, progressing steadily to their last lines, and the comfortable unconcern of Mr. Sandars, left her in a loneliness like death.

"Tst! Silly child!" complained Mr. Sandars. "You should have put the coat on."

Fay stared helplessly.

"You'll have to get out of that uniform. The coat won't go over that collar and cuffs. It's got a bare neck, child, and short sleeves; and you'll have to have your throat and arms bare—won't you—see?"

She stood dithering: too confused, too anxious about her performance, to think what to do.

"Come on: nip out of it here. There's only about twenty seconds to go. Here, I'll give you a hand. Don't mind me: I'm nearly old enough to be your father, and I've got a girl at home nearly as big as you."

And he helped her to remove her red and silver uniform, she suffering him because she did not know what else to do. Now

she was standing in her pink slip, and his eyes made the most of his brief opportunity. He held open the coat for her, and when she was in it, buttoned it up for her, and fixed its belt, like a kindly nurse. He also stroked it here and there—to smooth out the wrinkles, perhaps.

"There you are! Nothing ever suited you better. You look perfectly sweet in it, believe me. Everyone'll think so. And all the boys'll buy ices from you, just to have a chance of talking to you, and you'll make a nice fat commission. Stockings and shoes all right? Yes. Now the tray." He lifted it up for her, and she started to put its strap over her head, but he said "No," and guided it over one shoulder and under the other, adjusting it nicely across her right breast. He gave pains to adjusting it nicely on her right breast. Having already stocked the tray, he switched on its illumination, while she stood in front of him with knees and elbows trembling. Dampness formed at her hair roots and on her palms, and she turned to the discarded uniform for her handkerchief. "There. Twopenny choc-ices, and threepenny and fourpenny tubs."

The music was mounting to the *finale*, and he took her hand and led her to the door that gave on to the auditorium. Through this he thrust her gently, whispering, "Do just like Miss Kennard used to, see." She was now in a dark corner, unseen as yet by the audience, but its hot breath and fusty smell pressed upon her like the heat from a burned hillside. She dared not look at audience or screen, but, oh God, the music had changed sharply, and a white beam had joined the grey beam from the projection room. The grey beam still played on the screen, but this white beam with its edge of gold came looking for her. Looking for her. It found and framed her.

"Go on," whispered Mr. Sandars; and Fay, nearly blinded at first, and trembling as if the beam were a cold wind, walked along the rails of the orchestra pit, her aureole of white and gold accompanying her. She could see nothing of the audience, but she heard cheers and cat-calls and whistles, and the imitation of sumptuous kisses. Her nervous eyes, slanting up at the screen, saw the words "It's pure," writing themselves across it. "It's pure," declared the screen, as Fay walked on.

"Is it?" shouted a voice from far up the hillside. "I wonder."

And a roar of laughter rolled down towards her, and cries of "Gee! I doubt it," and "Don't you believe it," and "Rotten luck for someone if she is."

"It's delicious," affirmed the screen.

"You're right there. Not half!" And again the succulent imitation of kisses, and the avalanche of laughter.

"It's health-giving."

"Not half it ain't!" And at this the greatest laugh of all, so that other would-be wags developed the innuendo. "Yes, it does a boy good now and then." "Gawd, she'd put me right for a week."

She reached the midst of the rails, halted, and turned to face the central gangway. The white light, with its gold rim, made a large corona around her. Nervously she smiled. The boys whistled and cried, "Oh, s'nice!" and "Come up here, miss. I'm waiting for you," and "Anything else besides ices to sell, miss?" and "Shy, ain't she?"

Biting her lip, she dropped her eyes on her tray.

§

Roddy in his back row had seen her run out at the manager's call. He had watched the door for her return. Whenever it had opened, he had leaned forward to learn if it was she. And the last thing he had expected was to see her down there, walking in the splay of the spotlight.

When he recognized her, his heart jumped like a shot animal. The oval light, insulating her from everyone else in the world, rendered her in detail for him: her round black head, her bare throat and arms, her slender figure in the tight white coat, and her slim legs in their high-heeled shoes. She stood fatally outlined for him. And his heart ached with delight in her. It was pain; and yet it was joy to know that he loved someone as he had always wanted to love. It was both ache and sweetness to watch her passage along the floor, her halt and turn, her awkward smile with the large eyes lit up by the spotlight, and the instant fall of her lids. When the japes and laughter of the boys hurt her, it inflamed him, but less with anger than with desire. Had she cried beneath their lashing, he would have desired her even more. To a lad near him who was shouting an insult and wounding her, he turned and said wrathfully, "Oh, *shut* up, can't you?" but he knew, none the less, that his own need, produced to its maddest, was of a kind that would like to crush her and destroy her and die with her.

He could not understand why it should be so; and the thought, if dwelt upon, confused and worried him.

§

That night, as Fay came out through the swing doors, she saw him by the bus stop on the other side of the road. She had seen him there before, sometimes, but not recently, because last time their glances had met, and he had turned quickly away. Since then, if he had been watching her, he must have done it from some hidden place. But to-night he stood there openly, though uneasily: in an effort to conceal his embarrassment, he kept taking his cigarette from his lips and examining its end.

Not to catch his eyes, she turned at once and walked towards Vauxhall. The pavements were quiet, and something queer about the night disturbed her. It was still; it was cloudless; it was full of stars, and the stars sparkled as in a night of frost; the air struck cold after the packed heat of the theatre; and yet every now and then a flash lit up the northern sky, and a roll of thunder trembled beneath it. Spring lightning was at play somewhere, but how could a night be both still and stormy? How both cool and heavy? Where thunder without clouds?

This disquieting tremble in the beauty of the night attuned itself well to her half-pleased, half-frightened certainty that he was following her. She longed to glance round and make sure, but no excuse presented itself, till at last three drunks came swaying and singing towards her, their arms linked; and when she had dodged past them, she felt justified in turning her face to see them again.

Yes, he was coming the same way, some hundred paces behind. Half pleased, half frightened, she quickened her step, and her heart fluttered like the heart of a hunted thing. Fright drove her straight forward. Disordering her thoughts, it did not allow her to remember at first that she did not want him to see how poor was the street in which she lived. As unwaveringly as the tram lines at her side she hastened along South Lambeth Road, her heels beating on the pavement; she shot under the viaduct and out on to the broad space at the foot of Vauxhall Bridge. Traffic in plenty here: buses, cars, trams, and lorries streaming over the bridge, and under the great arch as if it were indeed a City Gate, and into the thick of South London. It enabled her to hesitate on a kerb and swing her eyes behind.

Yes, he was trailing her still. He was coming slowly along the pavement, fingering his cigarette and feigning ease. Oh, quick: if she hesitated longer, he'd be close on her. Without waiting for the lights to stop the traffic and allow her to cross, she turned into the darkness of the tunnel and ran along its hither

pavement and wall. She went like a mouse down a hole at sight of the cat.

But, the traffic diverging at its far end, she was arrested again ; and now, as she faced Upper Kennington Lane and saw the corner of her own street, she remembered that she did not want him to see where she lived. Should she walk past her corner, and go on and on ? But at that rate he might follow her all night. Should she run into Tyers Street and through her door before he could see where she had gone ? But he would guess that she had disappeared into one of the houses. Tossing a glance over her shoulder, she saw his figure in the dim light at the other end of the tunnel. Oh, what ? . . . Still without a decision, she just obeyed the habit in her limbs and, hurrying ahead, swung into Tyers Street. As she drew near the steps of her house, she wanted to turn her head and see if he was at the corner, but feared to ; and at the same time she decided in a flutter that he must be there, and accordingly walked on right past her door. She went straight on up the length of Tyers Street. Oh, what was she doing ? She did not know—just walking on without a plan and dreading to turn her head. And listening for steps behind.

And now she saw three people coming towards her : a big, portly man, a thin little woman, and a young girl.

Oh ! Her father and mother and Gracie. And he, from somewhere behind, would see their meeting ! In this moment she was ashamed of her father and mother. She didn't want to be, but she was. Her father so fat and florid, in his old working suit and frayed soft collar ! And her mother so work-worn and scraggy, a tired brown hat on her thin hair, and a tired brown coat over her working clothes ! She loved her father and mother, yes, *yes* ; and she didn't want to be ashamed of them . . . but oh dear. . . .

And now her father was waving a jovial hand and laughing his loud laugh—a sort of public house laugh, and very unrefined. She walked on towards them—what else to do, trapped like this between the shadower behind and the family in front ? And she gave them a smile while forcing back a sob.

And in the minute before she must speak to them, another thought smote and sickened her. She guessed where they had been. She saw in her mind the house from which they had come. They were coming from the direction of Lambeth Lower Marsh, and that meant they were coming from a visit to Mordern Street. They were coming from Vi's home in Mordern Street. At the thought of Mordern Street her own Tyers Street changed into something clean and quiet and respectable, but—"Oh, think of that home in Mordern Street, and then ask yourself if any nice boy'd want you."

No. Her head shook, as she forced back a sob. Her dreams

faded. They flickered out and died. For that district east of the Lower Marsh, with Mordern Street in its centre, was a dark and stormy quarter of Fay's small world; it lay but a mile away, threatening her flank; and to-night it was as if it had shot a warning shell over the housetops to burst at her feet.

Merrily her father was twinkling at her. "Gaw, that's my daughter, Ma! Made out of Four Ale she was, for the most part. Mother, that's your awf-spring, that is. You're responsible for that piece of work—after a little preliminary assistance, as you might say, from me. What you think of her, eh? Smart little piece of goods in her way."

"Hallo, Daddy."

"Evening, miss. How did you know where we were?"

"I saw you in the distance just as I was stepping in."

"Nothing wrong, is there, ducky?" asked her mother, detecting a sadness behind her smile.

"Good heavens, no. Why should there be anything wrong? I'm all right."

"Blimey, in the distance I didn't recognize you. I thought you were quite pretty. I said to your mother, 'Here's a nice bit of stuff coming along the street. Who's this?'"

"You look tired, ducks. She's looking real tired, Dad: all dark under her eyes. I'm not sure it's doing her any good being shut up in that dark, fuggy cinema, day in, day out. It's making her pale. I'm sure I never go in it but what the air's thick enough to knock you down. It's not healthy, it isn't, really."

"I'm not tired, Mum. I'm all right. And I'm not always in the dark. I'm outside quite a lot."

"Don't keep telling her she looks tired," her father remonstrated. "It's enough to *make* her ill. I know it always does me. Sometimes when I'm feeling as fresh as a daisy, a bloke comes along and tells me I'm not looking so good, and, blimey, I feel like a chewed rag straightaway! And if they tell me I'm looking fine when I feel like a bit of cotton waste, I buck up no end. There you are, Mother! I said it was thunder. Comic, on a night like this, but it's thunder all right. It sounds just like the guns used to in France."

"Come and get some supper, ducks, and go to bed."

"Where've you been, Mum?" asked Fay, for something to say. They were all walking the same way now, back towards home; and she was peering through the night to see if *he* was there. But she could see nothing of him. Tyers Street stretched before them, empty of all but its lamps, as far as its junction with the rumbling and glowing main road. Where could he be? Was he perhaps prying from an ambush on the farther side of the main road?

"We went to see Vi," her mother was saying.

"Oh, yes. . . ."

"It was your dad's idea. We only intended to pop in and see her, but we got talking and stayed on and on. She seemed glad to have us to talk to. She doesn't have much of a time, poor child."

"Was Bill there?"

"He was there when we come, but he didn't stay long."

"He never does when I blow in," laughed her father. "When I come in, he nips out. He's never loved me as he should since I told him a thing or two that time. He's properly frightened of me; that's the funny thing about it. I must be the only person he's got any respect for, but it's a good job there's somebody to put the fear o' God into the little piss-pot. That's why I reckon it's a good thing to turn in on our Vi sometimes, and let him know I'm still about."

"Yes, he always treats your father very respectfully, I will say," agreed her mother.

"How's Vi?" (Was that he, moving on the pavement behind that passing bus?)

"Oh, I suppose she's all right, but it's no life for a girl."

"I think it's just *awful*, the way she lives," put in Gracie.

"Oh well," objected her father, always sententious, "as you've made your bed, so you must lie on it. She *would* have him. She wouldn't listen to any sense, not from her mother and me. Just steady blind crazed, she was. For Gawd's sake keep some sense in *your* head, Fay, girl, when you feel like falling for a fellow. All we can do now is to help her make the best of it—but, lummy, the sight of her house does make you content with your own home, I must say."

They were at the steps of their own home. A last glance up and down the street. . . . No. . . . but undoubtedly he was watching from somewhere. He was seeing the family go wearily up the steps, with her following.

They passed into the narrow passage, and Gracie shut the door noisily. She had to struggle with it because its framework had sunk, so that its bottom scraped the floor-boards. It closed with a bang.

It had shut out the street.

In the darkness her father yawned. "Well, I'm for my bed, and anyone who says I'm going to get up in the morning is a liar. Night, Gracie. Night, Fay, my young fly-by-night."

"Good night, Dad. Good night, Mum."

"There's supper for you downstairs, darling."

"Oh, I don't want any supper to-night. Not to-night."

"Why, what's the matter with you, love? You *are* all right, aren't you?"

"Oh, I'm all right, I'm all right, I'm all right. Not hungry, that's all."

"Sure?"

"Quite sure."

"Well, good night, dearie; and you can have a long lay-in in the morning. We all will, see."

Without turning her head Fay walked into the little back room which she shared with Gracie: the room where Ted had died. She felt like a recaptured prisoner returning to his cell after a few hours of freedom. Gracie came after her quickly.

"What's the matter, Fay? You're crying about something."

"I'm not, I'm not! Don't be silly."

"What's up? Has something gawn wrong?"

"No, no, no, no, I tell you! Let me alone. I——"

But she could not keep up this tottering farce. It collapsed, and she flung herself on to the bed where her brother had died, and sobbed into her bent arm; Gracie touching her shoulder to comfort her, and begging to be told.

"I'm just tired, tired, tired. As Mother said, I'm tired. That's all. And, as Dad said, when she told me I looked tired, it made me feel worse. Gee, what a fool I am! . . . *I'm* all right! Yes, I'm all right!" And she leapt up. "Come, let's go to bed."

VI

RODDY had watched all the time. First he had peeped round the corner of Tyers Street, and then, as she went straight on, he had come boldly up the street and crossed into the cover of St. Oswald's Place. Peeping from here, he had seen her meeting with her family and their entry into their home.

To learn that this was her home, and these her parents, had surprised and disappointed him at first. It had struck at his ambition. But almost in the same moment it had ministered to his diffidence, his tenderness, and his desire to be Someone Big. If she was of a lower class than he, he would be able to get her more easily and hold her more securely; he would be able to raise her in the world and give her better things than she had known; and he would appear before her as something big. It healed his own smallness and insecurity that she should live in Tyers Street. And it flattered him to feel that he was a knight errant who would come and save her.

"I must get her out of this. Yes, my darling, I shall get you out of this. And I shall *want* my wife to feel that she's rising in the world, and not sinking, when she marries me. Sure, I shall."

And he walked home with his hands in his pockets and an electric happiness in his heart. He walked all the way: down Harleyford Street, and over the crossways at Kennington Gate, and down the long length of Brixton Road to Brixton Hill. He did not want to sit with passengers in a tram when he could walk with the population of his dreams. Rhythmically walking, one can let slip the real world like a garment that frets; one can ride right out of the body on one's spirited and galloping ambition. Roddy, striding along, instructed himself on his future in fine dramatic words. "To-morrow I go and find her. I wait no more. This time to-morrow I shall have spoken to her. I shall know. And she will come to me. I know it, I feel it. And I shall devote my life to being good to her."

Next morning he woke to find the rain pelting. Wherever the thunder had lain last night, it had now sent its clouds to occupy

and oppress the city. A baffling occupation, this, because he had planned to loiter on her pavements till he saw her come out. But, watching from his window as he dressed, he saw that the bombardment of the rain was too prodigal to endure. It would exhaust itself. And it did: when he came out into Brixton Hill, the clouds were parting, and forming into companies to march away. And just as he crossed into Brixton Road the sunlight burst upon London like a cymbal clash. And in a little while the sky at the end of the long grey road was the blue of a child's dress, and the clouds were torn shawls and scarves upon it.

He was in his best blue suit, and carried his grey overcoat on his arm because it was not as good as his suit. Roddy dressed much better now than when we first saw him searching the long roads, in his hunting kit. Gilly and Belle had laughed him out of the white neckerchief under his coat and the silver cap aslant on his head. Tall and straight and slim, but maturing in breast and shoulder, he gave much thought to dressing his neat figure as the gentlemen dressed theirs, who passed his gate, ascending to their suburbs on the hills. His frail mother had died since we met him last, but he was earning thirty shillings a week now at Hodson and Cooper's, in Lambeth Walk, and he had money to spend at the Fifty Shilling Tailors in Brixton Road.

By ten o'clock he was at the opening of Tyers Street. He loitered there for some time, and then made a circuit by St. Oswald's Place so as to command her door from higher up her street. And here he waited. The women, enjoying a Sunday gossip at their doors, and the children playing on the narrow camber, stared at him often, but he did not mind. A fellow could wait for his friend in the sunlight of a spring Sunday, smoking his fag and strolling up and down the pavements. That by an odd chance he was strolling over the site of the old Dark Walks he did not know, any more than the children or the women knew. No old lover's ghost, in knee breeches and wig, with his three-cornered hat under his arm, came strolling up (through the ghosts of dark trees) to touch him on the shoulder and wish him well. But perhaps the old blithe company were there.

How should he approach and speak to her? He did not know. Creation of Mrs. Muswell and Brixton Hill, and compact of middle-class gentility, he could not accost a girl with the ease of an Eddie Pope. But he was going to force himself to do it to-day; and he was going to trust to the moment to prompt him.

For three hours he dawdled there, or thereabouts, driven in time, by very shame, to quit St. Oswald's Place for Auckland Street, and Auckland Street for Leopold Street, and Leopold

Street for Vauxhall Walk and Goding Street—in fact, to cross and wander through and circumambulate the ghost of the old Gardens. It did not vex or tire him. Hope is a good shooting-stick on which to sit while you wait ; and suspense a fine sustaining draught.

§

It was nearly two o'clock when she came down the steps. Was it she? Yes, yes! She was carrying some cylindrical object lightly cloaked in newspaper. A—a jug? Yes—and he hid himself, because his tact showed him that she would not like to be caught with a jug. And indeed the jug had given him that brief wound again, but why? Mrs. Muswell had more than once sent Gilly or him to the Prince of Wales with a jug, and even Belle had gone sometimes, with a scoff for her mother's doubts. "Don't be silly, Mum. I'm not afraid of going into a pub. We're not living in eighteen eighty eight."

From his cover he saw her go into the Royal Vauxhall Tavern, at the corner opposite the viaduct, and come out again, and walk home more carefully, holding the jug like a delicate baby against her breast. And he pitied and loved her more.

Somewhere about three o'clock she came out again. She came out alone and turned northward, walking slowly on her pointed shoes, and very pensively, her head bent and her eyes on her advancing feet. He followed.

Turning west towards the river, she sauntered along Vauxhall Walk and under the viaduct to the Albert Embankment, where the traffic clattered between high factories and the plane trees of a riverside esplanade. She looked left and right before running across the roadway to the broad esplanade, and he thought her movements beautiful as a fawn's. Still wrapping her thoughts like a cloak around her, she went to the parapet and, resting her arms upon it, gazed down at the water.

Now! Have courage! He stood on the opposite pavement, waiting for courage. And at last, throwing back his shoulders, as if tossing off the shackling timidity, he dived for a break in the traffic and reached the farther side. He went straight as a hawk towards her.

Either she heard his deliberate steps, or she felt his shadow on the paving flags, for she glanced round and gasped "Oh!" And her eyes stared at him as at a ghost. It was a stare of unbelief and

fright, and it told him that a figure in her thoughts had come alive at her side.

"Excuse me . . ." he began ; and the fright in her eyes, and the shrinking of her body, heightened his desire.

"What . . ."

"I——" He laughed awkwardly ; and then, because he had thrown himself upon the inspiration of the moment, he spoke only the truth. "I've wanted to know you for so long, and I didn't know how."

Her arm lay along the stone parapet, and her fingers tried to grasp it. She still said nothing, but kept her eyes trained on his. And those eyes, like large blue grapes, made a dear torment of his desire.

"You know me, don't you?" he asked, smiling in a way which he thought was rather dashing, but which was really rather silly.

"I—I've seen you at the Red Domes, haven't I?" Evidently she was not going to be as truthful as he.

"Quite a few times. About fifty times, I should say." He had plenty of courage now. Proud of having carried the first defences, he felt big and manly. He became daring and arch. "And you know why, don't you?"

"No."

"Well, I wanted to get to know you, but I haven't had the bounce to speak to you till this moment."

"But how—how did you find me here?"

"Well . . . oh, damn (excuse me), I may as well own up. I'm afraid I followed you home last night. I'm sorry, but I did."

"But *why*?"

"'Why?' I should have thought it was obvious. I wanted to get to know more about you. I wanted to find out where you lived, so that I could somehow get to know you, see. I suppose I could have tried to make a date with you at the cinema, but I didn't want to offend you. I suppose you're always being pestered by fellows trying to get off with you? I'm not offending you now, am I?"

She turned and looked down again at the water. "No. . . ."

"May I ask your name?"

"Fay. Fay Warren."

"Fay Warren. . . . Well, will you let me—oh, hang it, I suppose you've got heaps of fellows who want to take you out, like?"

"No, I haven't—" and then she seemed to think that this might lessen her value, for she added, "Quite a few have wanted to, of course, but I haven't liked them so much. And, as you say, some

of the young chaps at the cinema get fresh and try to get off with me, but I let them know that I don't care for that sort of thing."

"Quite right, too. My God, I wish I could catch 'em at it! Stamp on their toes whenever they try it on: that's a good plan. You can always pretend it's an accident."

"Oh, I let 'em know all right that I'm not having any. They seem to think that I'm there for them to take liberties with. Well, I'm just not; that's all. I don't know who they think one is, sometimes, or who they think *they* are."

"I say, you looked terrific in that spotlight last night!"

"Oh, I hated it! I just hated it, I really did. I nearly died." Behind her, mounted on the balustrade, was a cast-iron lamp standard, with dolphins twining their tails about its base. She leaned back against it, and the grace of her attitude, unconscious in her, was a shaft of pain in him. "I never done it before. I only did it last night because the girl who usually does it was poorly. *And* I'll never do it again, I tell you that!"

"But why don't you like it? It made you look absolutely—absolutely lovely, if you don't mind my saying so."

"*Brrr*. . . ." She shivered and shook her head. "No, *thank* you! It makes one so conspicuous, like. And the people laugh at you sometimes, and it makes you want to go through the floor. Or they shout really rude things at you. It's not nice."

"Oh, my dear!" Real sympathy sounded in his words. "You mustn't be hurt like that. Gee, it maddens me! . . . But, I say, do you get any evenings off?"

"I get two early evenings."

"What's 'early'?"

"Nine o'clock."

"Golly! That's not much cop."

"I get a whole day off once every week."

"When?"

"Thursdays, just now."

"Oh damn (excuse me), but mine's Wednesdays. Still, I can get away by seven o'clock on Thursday. I say, couldn't we go somewhere? Couldn't I take you to the pictures—oh, no, that wouldn't do——"

Both laughed, and he thought her smile was lovely. Her teeth, between her red-pencilled lips, were china-white.

"You would come with me somewhere, wouldn't you?"

"I wouldn't mind. . . ."

"What about the second house at a music hall?"

"Oh, I haven't been to a music hall for years! That'd be lovely. That'd be *gorgeous*."

"Well, what about the Empress at Brixton?—no, the Surrey Hip, because Thursday's always a gala night there. Ever been to a gala night?"

"No."

"Well, wait and see, wait and see."

"Oh, what fun!" Her eyes sparkled.

"Will you come, then?"

"Rather! What do *you* think? It'll be *lovely*. I say, ta, most awfully. It *is* kind of you."

"Gee, that's fine! Gosh, I wish it was Thursday now! Where'll we meet? In your street?"

"Oh no. . . . Not there. . . ."

"Let's see, then. . . . Kennington Park, eh, at the gate by the church?"

"Yes, rather. Yes, that'll be all right. Ta, ever so."

"And some other time I'll take you to the Empress, Brixton. That's a real slap-up place. I live at Brixton, you see: on Brixton Hill."

"Oh, do you? It's a nice part, that. Lovely."

"H'm. . . ." He shook his head in a superior way, pursing doubtful lips. "It's not what it was. It's going down hill a bit, I'm afraid."

Both were now resting their arms on the parapet and gazing down at the green reflections under the embankment wall, or lifting their eyes to see the winking, stone-grey waves dancing to the whip of a southerly breeze. Driftwood bobbed down the stream, and a single tug was ravelling through the tide towards the wharves and cranes that herded by Vauxhall Bridge. Punch, punch, punch, it thrust its arrowhead way through the pressure of the home-speeding, sea-hungry water. Far away in the other direction, down the scurry of the tide, and beyond the shining new Lambeth Bridge, the Victoria Tower lifted high into a luminous sky; and its reflection came the whole way towards Roddy and Fay, lying obliquely on the crimped water, like a shaking, admonitory finger.

"I love the river, don't you?" said Roddy.

"I don't know. I don't think I've thought much about it. It's lovely like it is now, with the sun on it, but it can look horrible sometimes. *Ghastly*. What's that place on the other side, behind the trees?"

"That? I'm afraid I don't know. Fine, isn't it?"

It was, in fact, the Tate Gallery, but the children of the south bank know little of the civilization of the Middlesex shore.

"It's artistic in a way, I think. . . . Was that your dad and mother you came to the Red Domes with?"

"Law, no! But fancy your remembering that!"

This was to strike her foil from her hand, and she hastened to recover it. "Oh, but he was such a handsome old gentleman, and with an absolutely *thrilling* hat," she laughed. "One couldn't very well forget him, could one?"

"That's my uncle. And the others were my auntie and two cousins. He's a professor of music and a composer. Composed quite a lot, and very good stuff, I believe. He was quite well known in his day. I live with my uncle and auntie, you see. My dad was killed in the war. A pity—because, well, it dished my chances properly. He was in the Civil Service, and doing very well, I believe."

"Why, what do you do now?"

"I'm an assistant at Hodson and Cooper's."

"What? In Lambeth Walk?"

"Yes." He had heard a hint of disappointment in her accent, and was quick to justify himself. "But it's a fine shop. There are all sorts of shops in Lambeth Walk, you know——"

"I ought to know," she interrupted with her brief smile. "We often shop there——"

"—and Hodson and Cooper's are one of the biggest firms in South London. I was at Paget and Lamb's before, which was a better class trade, but not such good money, as I'm second provision hand now at Hodson's. But I'm not going to be a shop assistant all my life. I got other ideas." And, pricked by that hint of disapproval, he lunged without mercy at her. "Was that *your* father and mother I saw you with last night?"

Fay looked down again at the water. "Yes, that's right."

"What does *he* do, if I may——"

"He's an . . . engineer."

"Is he?"

"Yes. He's at Duffield and Winsell's now. It's a terrifically famous firm, of course, but . . . trade's bad, on the whole, and he doesn't make anything like what he used to, so we're not so terrifically well off just now. That's why I had to go out to business." She flicked some dust from the parapet. "But my brother Steve's doing well. He's a motor engineer out at Camberwell. He's married, and got a lovely house out there. . . ."

Stormy clouds had surged up before the press of the southerly breeze and heaped themselves above the crotchety buildings of the opposite embankment and the toy traffic moving beneath; and some of them were slate-grey fells which the sunlight splashed, and others were hummocks of alpine snow edged with gold. The flags along the roofs of Thames House languished and drooped on their masts, as the air stilled. Gulls wheeled and cawed harshly above the seaward-sliding waters of the reach. "Krah'k-krah'k,"

they called. " Krah'k-krah'k. Krah'k "; while these two, Roddy and Fay, like a pair of gulls on the riverside mud, stood preening and prinking their feathers, each anxious to stand well with the other.

" Krah'k-krah'k. Krah'k-krah'k."

VII

Now this unsteady March weather yielded long days of rain ; and great was Roddy's rebellion when he saw that Thursday night, indifferent to their meeting, was going to busy itself with gusty winds and a thin, unrelenting rain. He had pictured himself sitting with her in Kennington Park before they went to the theatre, and walking with her under the stars when the show was over, and perhaps kissing her in the shelter of the dark. As it was, the pat-patter of the rain compelled them to linger in a café, while they struggled with the silences that kept falling between them. He tried to feel happy, but he was not as happy as he had hoped to be. He was too nervous and strained. Every minute he was either acting to impress her, or straining to amuse her ; and fifty times he looked at his watch, longing for the time when he could sit in silence at her side and hand over her entertainment to the artists at the Hippodrome.

"Well," said he at last, with forced gaiety, "we might be going now."

"Oh yes! Let's! *Let's!*" she exclaimed, stressing her enthusiasm, so as to help him in his difficulties.

And out into the illuminated night they went, and hurried through the slanting needles of the rain towards the road that held the Hippodrome. This was one of the straight broad thoroughfares that ran from the bridges through the thick of South London, with dark, cheap streets on either side. It was a long procession of shop lights and neon lights, as they came into it ; and the brightest of the façades which the wet pavements reflected was that of the Surrey Hippodrome. It shouted over the pavement in red neon lighting, "QUICK FIRE VARIETY" ; and Fay, at the sight of it, gave a skip of eager anticipation, which was three parts genuine, and one part acted to please him. Already the audience was streaming out from the first house, with a burgeoning of umbrellas ; and the queues for the second house were contracting like wet worms, so as to push through the doors as they opened, and snatch from Fortune a seat in the front of the world.

"Oh, come on!" pleaded Fay, skipping again.

"It's all right," soothed Roddy grandly. "We got reserved seats."

"Yes, but—I'm *excited*," she protested, with raised brows and lit-up eyes.

"The great thing on these occasions is to keep calm," said Roddy, quoting his Uncle Vic.

And like a man of the world, and a man of substance too, he led her past the less fortunate queues and into the vestibule. Linkman and doorman accepted them as patrons of the higher order, and ushered them through doors and along galleries into a large saloon, like the bar of a public house, where people stood drinking whiskey and stout and gin, and smoking and arguing and laughing, while portraits of old variety favourites looked down upon them, grinning and winking and ogling, though their present audience was giving them no attention whatever. Here and there among the portraits, and as faded and unheeded and forgotten, hung quaint old playbills of gala nights of long ago.

"Like a drink?" offered Roddy, feeling that he ought to, but not wanting to.

"Oh no," demurred Fay. "No. Ta, though, awfully."

And he, though he loved her, was glad, because he had already spent more than he cared to remember.

And then the janitor, satisfied that the last stragglers of the first house were gone, ushered these two into the auditorium. They passed out of the bright light and beery smell of the saloon into a twilit temple and an air that was hot as a bread oven's breath, and thick with stale smoke, stale whiffs of oranges and sweat, and low, settling clouds of carpet dust.

A familiar air to Fay of the Red Domes; but the vast, dim house that held it was not; it was strange. What she saw, without realisation, and without criticism, was a lost pocket of the past: a fragment of Victoria's reign left over and still alive behind the new neon lighting of the Hippodrome's façade. No money in these streets to remould and redecorate a theatre in the style of a new century! This was a blood-red mosque embossed with tarnished gold. Seats of dusty crimson plush sloped towards a proscenium of imitation red marble which framed, in its turn, dusty plush curtains of crimson and gold. Behind the fauteuils of parterre or circle were rows of hard benches for the people of the queues, and the back walls that enclosed these parts were as plain and bare as the front walls were pretentious and gilded. An immense chandelier hung from the clouds and thick darkness of the roof and spread a rusty yellow light over all.

And now, at nine o'clock of the evening, the abraded carpets were bespattered with the litter of the gala just dead: burst balloons, tangled streamers, discarded paper hats, and programmes and newspapers that had served their turn and been tossed aside.

Programme girls, in red uniforms, gleaned among the droppings of the feast.

One of them came to escort Fay and Roddy to their seats in the third row of the stalls.

"But this is wonderful!" exclaimed Fay gratefully.

"I could have had the front row," said Roddy, to let her know that he had paid for the best, "but I never like to be too close."

"Oh, but this is just perfect! This is divine!"

"Chocolates, sir?" interrupted the programme girl; and Roddy wished she hadn't. But did Fay mark his moment of indecision?—for she said quickly, "No, I don't want any chocolates, I don't, really"; whereat he, ashamed of having hesitated, answered, "Nonsense. What'll you have?"

"Well, let me pay for it, mayn't I?" she asked.

"You may not." All the hands of Brixton touched him on the arm and forbade this. "We'll have these, shall we?" And he bought her a shilling bag.

"Oh, you *shouldn't*, you *shouldn't*," she rebuked.

"Stuff! This is a celebration, isn't it? This is a gala night."

And they sat down in their isolated grandeur, and Fay looked at the programme, while he, for a few bad moments, considered how much he had spent so far. Seven and eightpence already. It made him feel a little shaken and sick.

Silence sat between them. Oh, was she bored? Was he failing her? Had other boys been more entertaining? What could he say now to amuse her? And would he have the courage to take her hand? Supposing she snatched it away, so that he shivered at the rebuff, and the rest of the evening was a wilderness of shame.

And Fay, as he thought these things, was watching the people pouring in from the saloon doors, of whom many were boys with their girls, like Roddy and her. She was comparing him with the other boys: boys with hats on the backs of their heads or caps on the sides, boys with fags behind their ears or drooping from their lips, boys with their hands in their pockets and their mackintosh collars turned up, boys in jerseys and chokers with selfish eyes and silly, open mouths; and she thought what a gentleman he was, compared with most of them. She thought also how much more refined she was than most of the girls. Hardly one of them had any style of her own: each had made of herself but a poor copy of Greta Garbo or Joan Crawford or some other Hollywood heroine. She had been sharply disappointed to learn that he was only a grocer's hand, but, liking him well enough to want to love him, she remembered that at least he was a gentleman by birth and spoke of doing larger things.

The thoughts of both were guillotined by the falling of the curtains over the advertisement screen, the flooding of its hem by the footlights, and the rising of the conductor above the swaying and twanging instruments of the orchestra. Fay gave her little tremor of appreciation—partly to please Roddy. The conductor tapped with his baton; he lifted it; he swung it; and the orchestra, believing with some truth that noise is the best creator of the gala mood, trumpeted and banged and thundered.

"One," announced the indicators at the sides of the proscenium.

"The Eight Trevor Babes," said the programme.

In a theatre whose seats are "from 6d. to 2s." they cannot afford the best; and the Eight Trevor Babes were seen to be eight tiny girls in wisps of blue chiffon who danced and sang together, their naked limbs well trained, but their voices raw and harsh. What their real ages were it would have been hard to guess, but they looked about eight or nine. Such children are cheap. Cheaper, sometimes, than performing animals. Like performing animals they did their stuff with mechanical certainty, swinging their pink legs, wagging their behinds, doing the splits, and casting roguish and suggestive glances at the men. One, a wild-haired waif, danced in front of the others and did all the contortions out of the contortionist's bag. Then, tap-tappity-tap, tap-tappity-tap, their little toes beat on the boards in simultaneous dancing: tap-tappity-tap, tap-tappity-tap, their feet as drilled to their uses, as rhythmic and sure, as the unconscious parts of a machine. They were symbols, symbols, eight little symbols, the Eight Trevor Babes, of the use of children for profit, while they are fresh and lively and cheap; and they sang with their hard, torn voices as they danced as their masters had bidden them. Sides to the audience, backs to the audience, fronts to the audience, they danced tap-tappity-tap; and at the end of their act, they curtsied prettily, and then came before the dropped curtains with linked hands to take their call.

"That was nice, wasn't it?" said Roddy, clapping with the rest, and hoping she had liked it.

"Very artistic, I think," agreed Fay.

"Two," said the indicators.

"Daisy and Duggie Belden. Versatile Comedy Pair," said the programme.

And the curtain rose on a drop-scene which apparently represented a street in Nuremberg. This mediæval street was empty except for a man sitting in the middle of the roadway on a gilded drawing-room chair. The gabled houses were Old German, but the man was dressed like a Derby tipster, in a brown billycock hat, ginger wig, and loud check suit; and he strummed on a banjo, as he sat

on his spindly chair. Well might such a visitor empty the footpaths and the windows of a mediæval street for as far as the eye could reach. His rubbery face, cleft with a hundred laughing wrinkles, was the face of a man of sixty or more ; and one got the impression that this was his last engagement on the halls before he went as a busker among the theatre queues : was he not already busking in the Nuremberg street ? Old artists are cheap too. After completing a cockney song he tossed his banjo to an unseen ghost in the Nuremberg street, and began to stride back and forth across the empty highroad, as he told his stories with raucous shouts and cackling laughter. Broader and broader grew his smile, and his jokes, and louder and louder the laughter of the men in the audience and the delighted, horrified shrieking of the girls ; but Roddy moved uneasily in his seat and glanced sideways at Fay.

"Puttin' flesh on I am, boys," shouted Duggie Belden, rubbing the bulge of his waistcoat, and squinting one eye down its west slope, and then the other down its east. "Puttin' flesh on, not a dah't abah't it. Gettin' worried abah't it, I am. Yuss. And I bin to the doctor abah't it too. And, wouldjer believe it, he says, 'Strip.' Jest like that : 'Strip.' I says, 'What ?' 'Strip,' says he, 'I want to examine you.' 'Examine my foot !' I says, 'No, not your foot, ole boy,' says he. 'Well, what ?' says I. 'Well,' says he, 'among other things I want to examine your testimonials.' Didj'ever ? I don't know what you're laughin' at, girls ; I don't, straight. Believe it or not, I had to strip—strip stark naked. Oh, I did feel a fool, girls ! And he examines me and says, 'You'll have to diet.' 'Dye it !' I says. 'Yes, diet.' Nah . . . I wasn't havin' that. I wasn't going to dye it. I mean, what colour could I dye it ? It was blue with the cold, anyway."

And before the roars of laughter had rolled away, a voice was heard calling to him from the wings, "Stop that, Duggie ! Don't be coarse now ! You know what I said !" and an enormous pink cow of a woman came stepping on to the stage like a young and saucy girl. Daisy Belden this, and his wife, without a doubt ; and a fine old trouper too : pink and lined and laughing and sixty ; with bare arms like sucking pigs, and silk-hosed calves like grocer's hams, and a pink, flouncy frock like a sweetheart's at the fair, and hair more golden than the sunlight. She cast sheep's eyes at the audience, and tossed a remark at the conductor, and smacked Duggie's hand away archly when he pinched her fat arm and told her that her tyre was flat, or when he slapped her huge hip and assured her that it was good pre-war stuff. Yes, a fine old golden trouper ; well skilled in all the tricks ; and still earning a trifle in Variety, by her old man's side.

Duggie stared at her fine bosom; he walked all round it; he rose on tip-toe and cocked an eye down its valley, and he turned and winked at the boys: "Gala night to-night, boys!" and she slapped his face, as a lady should. He smacked the fine bosom with the back of his hand, and adjured her, "Nah! Take 'em away. Take 'em away, Daisy. It may be gala night, but it's not time for the balloons yet"; and she pouted prettily. He asked her, "'Ere, Daisy, what's the loveliest thing in the world?" and she went coy, and put her finger to her lips "Nah! I don't mean *you*," he yelled. "Good Gawd, no!" and she was surprised and hurt. "Nah! Not you. It's Miss Greeter Garbo"; and she sulked like a child denied a sweetmeat, and she tripped to a corner of the stage and shook her shoulders, refusing to be appeased, and she turned on him and cried, "She isn't! She isn't! I'll tell you what's the most beautiful thing in the world."

"*You'll* tell me what's the most beautiful thing in the world?"

"Yes. You ask me. Ask me what's the most beautiful thing in the world?"

"Well, what's the most beautiful thing in the world?"

"It's sleep. Sleep."

"Sleep, is it?"

"Certainly, Duggie" Daisy looked up towards the batten lights and shook her head sadly. "Sleep is the most beautiful thing in the world."

"Yuss: next to Miss Greeter Garbo."

And he walked all round the stage, as he thought how beautiful it was; and Daisy walked forward to the footlights in a pique, that a man should speak so to his wife.

Then they were singing and dancing together, she doing all the graceful hand-spreads at the audience, all the naughty thigh-jerks, all the pretty curtseys, all the traditional "fascination," which the tiny pink children had done in the previous act. They were a popular turn, Daisy and Duggie; and they tripped off into the wings, she coyly, he comically, to a tumult of applause. Bless them both for a fine, brave pair. I applaud them too.

"H'm . . ." murmured Roddy, dubiously. "That was going a bit strong, I think. Yes, I think they went a bit too far."

And Fay thought it as wise to say, "Perhaps. . . ." though she was used to Ernie Warren, her father.

"It doesn't seem to be a very high-class show here," he apologized.

"Oh, I think it's *nice*."

"Enjoying yourself?"

"*Rather!* I'm terribly happy."

"Good. I'm so glad."

And as the curtain lifted for the next act, he advanced his hand and found hers. He felt her hand open and shut on his nervously; but she did not draw it away; she just stared at the bright stage before her, and at two girls dancing. He brought over his other hand and laid it on hers, as on something which he would preserve and hold. Her warm hand kept jerking within his, like a caught bird; and the fright in it stirred his desire.

§

The gaiety of the gala, and All The Fun Of The Fair, came after the Interval. The audience trooped back from the bars or the street; the red and gold curtains fell again across the advertisement screen; the house lights went down, and the footlights went up; the orchestra snapped off one tune in its middle, as if it were really of no importance, and began another even noisier; a pin-light felt for the centre of the curtains and waited there; a man's voice could be heard shouting last instructions behind the curtains, and then the curtains parted, and soared up, looping themselves into folds.

It was the Nuremberg street again. And there in the middle of the road, behind a table laden with prizes, stood the Master of the Ceremonies in his evening dress, and on either side of him, in long lines, all the artists of the week's bill, both the ladies and the gentlemen, both those who had already appeared and those who were yet to appear; and some of them were in the costumes of their acts, and some were in their dressing-gowns. There stood Daisy and Duggie, and the Two Eden Sisters, and the Eight Trevor Babes, and the comics, and the ventriloquist, and the six instrumentalists of the Crazy Jazz Band.

"Now, ladies and gentlemen," shouted the M.C. "I have here a few prizes. And will the following lady kindly step up——"

And, taking a hand mirror from his table, and catching the pin-light in it, so that he refracted a beam on to the audience, he played the beam all over the theatre. It danced along the stalls, it sprang to the circle and hopped among the faces there; it flew up and visited the gallery; it returned and paused on a woman's face in a back stall.

"Thank you, madam. Come along, please."

And she stood up, a blowsy, laughing, shoulder-shrugging housewife from a small street near by ; and the audience, ever generous, applauded her success with clapping and stamping and whistling ; while an usher, beckoning her to follow, led her up some steps on to the stage, where Duggie Belden, receiving her prize from the M.C., presented it to her with a comedy bow. It was a tray of groceries. He also presented her with a kiss, and the audience with a wink ; and she started back with a shriek, and nearly scattered the groceries on to the stage—to the boisterous laughter of the audience. The babies in the audience whimpered and prattled, as their mothers dandled them and watched the show.

And again the beam danced and bounded and slid till it came to rest on a young gentleman in the pit, a lanky young man, who, determined to be waggish and to enjoy a popular success, walked up to the stage with a swagger and a high speed and a waving of his hand to all his friends everywhere. It fell to the Eden Sisters to present him with his prize, a tin of tobacco, and he, after bowing low, promptly kissed the nearer of them, and set about chasing the other for his manifest right. Immense appreciation and encouragement from the audience. Coy flight and resistance of the sister ; triumphant achievement of the young man ; and a pretty little slap on his impudent cheek, after which he swaggered back, not without rubbing his cheek and grimacing at the audience.

And, now with the orchestra still braying to the smoky roof, the beam flickered and jiggled along the front of the stalls, and Roddy found himself shaking with nervousness. He wanted it to rest on him, and he didn't want it to ; for he was of the same blend as Fay, longing for the limelight and yet shivering from it, lest in its bright insulation he failed and was foolish. It dithered so close to him that he prayed for it to pass ; and it passed, to his disappointment ; it flew up like a white bird to the circle and alighted on the head of a girl.

No shyness here. She gave a proper shriek, but jumped up at once and came running and tripping down the steps ; and when the boys saw that she was pretty, they accompanied her all the way to the stage with catcalls and the sibilance of kisses. She took her prize, a trussed towel on a cardboard tray, from the ventriloquist and his doll, and ran like a naiad down into the dark pool of the auditorium, before the ventriloquist, or the doll, could kiss her. Loud cries of " Shame ! "

So the wayward, irresolute light sought and fetched them, men and women, lads and girls ; and they came and went with their prizes : a tray of canned goods, a joint of beef, a set of household jugs, a tea service ; and the lady artists gave to the gentlemen, and the gentlemen to the ladies ; and the hundreds, still unselected, cheered and applauded those who has been luckier

than they; and the babies prattled, unconcerned, in the eightpenny pit.

The last prize safely home, the pin-light enlarged into a search-light and soared up to the roof; and there behind the chandelier, behold a suspended and laden sheet, like the sheet in Peter's vision, caught at the four corners. Like the same sheet it sank towards the earth; and the faces of the audience turned up towards it so that they looked water-lilies on a dark pool; and all their hands shot up like tall reeds out of the pool, as the sheet broke apart, and the coloured balloons floated downwards, and the confetti fell like snow. And the programme girls walked the gangways, tossing rolled-up paper hats and streamers among the audience, as the farm-wives toss their maize to the poultry; and the balloons burst in every part of the house with the noise of pistol shots—burst in the ears of girls, banged in the protecting and fighting arms of their captors, banged under the behinds of rash young men; while coloured and dazzle-pattern spotlights swayed their long shafts through the half-darkness; and the artists on the stage tossed their streamers into the scrimmaging audience, the ladies with poor results, and the men with conspicuous and conscious skill; and the gallery dropped its streamers to the circle, and the circle shot its streamers into the stalls, and the stalls hurled theirs in fine parabolas on to the stage; till at last the whole theatre, gallery, circle, stalls, and stage, was linked in good fellowship by ribbons as frail as a whisper and as evanescent as time. And in the midst of it, down there on the parterre, Roddy and Fay, standing for a friendly fight, he attacking the yellow balloon which by manly prowess he had won for her, and she defending it as a mother her child; and then he abandoning the assault because he hadn't the heart to burst the bubble, and attempting instead to tie her up in paper bands.

§

And into the night they came with the outstreaming people, to find that the rain had gone from the world arm in arm with the wind, and the stars were having a gala of their own. The luminous signs on the shop fronts, sizzling and jerking, laid something of festival down the long vista of the road. Fay, greatly happy, swung her yellow balloon in her left hand and put her right hand under his arm (so that his heart, like another balloon, nearly shot to the stars) and, thus linked to him, she skipped and tripped at his side. If there was gala anywhere that minute, it was inside his head.

"Don't let's go home yet," he said. "Let's go for a walk."

"Yes, let's. Oh, let's. We don't want to go home. Who wants to go home?"

And, naturally, they went straight towards the river. They crossed St. George's Circus and walked on and on, along the broad, straight Lambeth Road. They passed moon-pale faces and dark, hurrying figures, and heard quick snatches of talk that swept by them like breaths of wind. They walked on—they and a silence and a happiness. Roddy, looking straight ahead, was bathed in happiness because he had held her hand all through the second half and stroked it, and because he was wondering if she would kiss him by the river; and Fay, turning her head from him, and floating her balloon on their wake in the air, was happy because she was near to believing that here at last was *he*. She longed to believe it, and rest. The grocer's shop was a shadow on her faith, and a worrying shadow; but was anything perfect in this world? And perhaps it would pass. His ways were so different from those of common boys that surely he would go on soon to something better. He acted and spoke quite different, you couldn't deny it. He walked into the best seats at the theatre as if they were his natural place. And in character he was almost all that she had wanted—so kind and gentle and gentlemanly. Oh, wouldn't it be wonderful if this were really he! To help herself believe it, she asked herself if she could really expect anything better. She showed herself pictures on the screen of her mind: her father . . . her bedroom—yes, and the disease of which Ted had died. . . . Vi . . . Vi's home in Mordern Street, and all that dark quarter near the Lower Marsh.

And, seeing that dark quarter, she wound her fingers round his arm; and instantly she felt his arm pressing her hand against his side in eager possession.

Why talk? They walked on silently, and the road lifted for its low flight over Lambeth Bridge. There were the golden-crested obelisks standing like sentinels on either side of the bridge. Here, on their right, were the old grey tower of Lambeth Church, and the old Tudor gatehouse of the Archbishop's Palace. There, beyond the river, against a glow in the sky, were all the towers of Westminster. A few steps more, and they saw the lamps of the farther embankment stretching like a necklace under the trees and stabbing the sleek water with golden stilettos that trembled as if afraid.

"Oh!" cried Fay.

"Come," commanded Roddy; and, taking her fingers, he drew her on to the bridge. He led her along the footpath as far as the second alcove.

There are four alcoves on each side of Lambeth Bridge; and

they are embrasures in the balustrades, recessed above the ornamental buttresses that end the piers. Each holds a stone seat within its embrace and supports on its shoulders a lamp standard. The one to which Roddy brought Fay on this midnight a few years ago is the second on the downstream footpath, as you cross from Lambeth to Westminster.

They leaned against its granite seat and looked over the stone shoulder at the sweep of Lambeth Reach.

"What do you say to that?" he demanded.

"It's wonderful. It's absolutely wonderful to-night. . . . Oh, isn't it lovely?"

The flood tide was running strong, and a south west wind drove a wash over the water to break against Lambeth Pier. The pontoon of the pier creaked between its piles as it rose and fell. The lamps along the Westminster wall were yellow, and those along the Surrey bank were blue; and of these two, it was the Surrey lamps only whose reflections lay now on the water, in flakes and splinters of light. But at the end of the reach the lamps of Westminster Bridge laid seven paths of broken gold down the midst of the tideway.

"My!" exclaimed Fay. "Oh, I'm glad we came here to-night! It's just terrific, isn't it? It makes me feel all shivery, like."

The Houses of Parliament were dead, the legislators gone. Only the round face of Big Ben was alight, and its chimes, rebuffed by the wind, sounded a quarter to midnight, as Roddy and Fay stood gazing. The three cliffs of Thames House were dark too, their business done; and so was the Archbishop's Palace, His Grace asleep or abroad. But in the distance the tall buildings of the Strand, curving round the river, were pierced with lights; and white summit of Shell-Mex House was floodlit, so that it seemed a dome of the Celestial City in the sky.

"Doesn't it make you proud of England?" said Roddy.

"Rather! It's superb. Just wonderful."

He slipped his arm about her waist. "Gee, I'm glad I'm English. . . . The water's pitch black, isn't it? I wonder why they have orange lights at the top of each arch—there, on Westminster Bridge. . . . Isn't it funny the way a beautiful view always makes you long to do tremendous big things in the world, like music does? Does it get you like that?"

"I don't know. I don't think so. I don't think I'm very clever, really. I only know it's lovely."

"Gosh, it makes me not only long to but feel cocksure I can. Gosh, I wonder if I ever shall."

"Oh, I do hope you will. I do, really."

The bridge was empty. A few buses had passed them, and a

few speeding cars, but now it was empty. He turned to draw her closer ; and, raising her eyes to his, she leaned against him.

This was one of the great moments in Roddy's life. For a moment he experienced completion. Fay, because she was beautiful, and had leaned her beauty against his body, offering it, was able in this moment to fill to the brim the two needs of his nature : to be someone, and to have someone. To fill them over-high, for he gasped, " Oh ! " as in pain, before he kissed her. The yellow balloon dangled at her side, as she kissed him affectionately, longingly.

VIII

"It's extraordinary," Uncle Vic would say, when his whimsicalities at the breakfast table provoked only silence, Belle keeping her head in her fashion journal, Mrs. Muswell attending to the tea-pot, and Gilly shrugging his shoulders, "that I who am far and away the oldest here, should be the only one who is young in heart. Belle has the features of a pretty child, and the expression of an old woman; Gilly, who did reveal at one time some of the irrepressible vivacity of the puppy, is now mellowing into a quiet old house-dog; while I, though I am fast heading for the last round-up, still retain the—as you might say—heart of a child."

"Perhaps it's second childhood," grunted Gilly.

"I don't think so," Uncle Vic argued, pretending to consider this interpretation seriously. "To say that it is second childhood is to postulate a curve: a curve out of childishness through maturity and back again into childishness, whereas I have never felt the slightest slackening of the early fires. No, no: on the contrary, a kind of rising splendour. A surging gusto; an ever-increasing *joie de vivre*. Through all my sixty years and more I have been at the mercy of this ebullition of high spirits, and I cannot detect at the moment any symptom which might suggest that my natural force is abating."

"Do you think it could be retarded development, Dad?" inquired Gilly.

"No. No," Uncle Vic announced firmly. "I would rather suggest that it is retarded decay. But whatever the astounding phenomenon is"—and he began to pack up his table napkin, for he had eaten all that he wanted, and his music room was drawing him—"it is wasted on this household. It meets with no appreciation; I even feel sometimes that it is resented." He pushed back his chair and rose, filling his pipe. "Frustration, thy name is Victor Muswell—'Victor Muswell, Esquire,' be it noted, and not 'Mr. V. Muswell.' Disappointment and defeat are my daily companions, who sit with me at the breakfast table and accompany me to my music room; and they will walk with me till the end, which God grant may be soon." And with these two companions he moved towards the door, murmuring, "A

foiled, circuitous wanderer . . . till at last the longed-for dash of waves is heard, and wide his luminous home of waters opens . . . and the new-bathed stars emerge, to shine upon the Aral Sea."

When Uncle Vic called himself, as he so frequently did, "a foiled, circuitous wanderer," he may have been playing at pathos, but there was a core of wistful truth in the words. He *was*, in more ways than one, a foiled, circuitous wanderer.

His creative fount, such as it was, had been foiled. It was never a Wagnerian fount, but at least it had been a pretty little jet from the Pierian spring; and recognition and opportunity together might have strengthened him to shape it into light but original music. But recognition had never come, nor opportunity wide enough for indolence to get through. Throughout his best years the need to earn money had dyked up the stream; and his limited energy had been given to the disgusting task of teaching the piano to children, and to the exhausting business of losing his temper with them, and shouting and gesticulating at them, as an artist should when his sensibility is offended: two activities which, as he rightly declared, were "an expense of spirit in a waste of shame." Such creative energy as escaped the dykes had trickled away and lost itself in droll talk, quaint dress, and original deportment; and in dreaming of the music that he might have created, had his strength been left to him. When in his late years unemployment came with its gift of leisure, it was too late: discouragement had destroyed his will. Without hope of a public he did not want to sing.

Foiled, he became a circuitous wanderer. From the breakfast table he wandered (with the newspaper) to the music room. In the music room he rested for a while in the easy chair. He opened the newspaper and reviewed in detail all that had happened in the more energetic world. The newspaper exhausted, he relaxed for a little. Then, since there was nothing better to do, he dragged himself up like a camel, and wandered to the table to compose. Sometimes he tried to compose music, but—no public wanted it, no public anywhere, and what was the good? More probably he composed letters, for these, if they did not bring him applause, did sometimes bring him money. And even when they failed to do this, they gave him the interest of a private game. They gave him the suspense and the happy calculations of a gambler. Moreover he was able in these letters to deploy his talent for pathos and his gift of phrase. They were begging letters.

A few weeks before we first met him—or, rather, before we first heard his footsteps running, at the sound of the postman's bell,

to the hall door mat in a race with his wife—he had received a begging letter from a musician in distress. The letter did not achieve its purpose; it achieved something very like the opposite. It put another competitor into the field. The poor man's letter drew no money from Victor Muswell—and not because the fool had addressed the envelope, "Mr. V. Muswell," though this was maddening, but because Mr. Muswell's moment of pity had been immediately overwhelmed by the inspiration to do likewise. Behold a new beggar coming down upon the market place. And a much more eloquent one. Your common beggar could not compete with the artistry of Uncle Vic. He had neither the imagination nor the advancing battalions of language.

"Dear Sir," Mr. Muswell would write, "this is the first time I have made an appeal to the heart of a brother musician—" it was probably the hundredth time—"and I do not find it easy to do. I trust that you will not mind my calling you a brother musician, although your career has been as distinguished by success as mine by failure. I do not know why I should have thought of writing to you, unless it be that I have always been one of your greatest admirers, and have so often endeavoured in my own narrow sphere, as conductor, teacher, or executant, to interpret your work to the people. I still do, and shall continue to, whenever a chance comes my way. I too enjoyed some small recognition in the past, though nothing comparable to yours; and it proved a transient thing, so that now, when old age and ill health have overtaken me, I am obliged to accept the knowledge (and how hard this is to a man who had his ambitions, you, sir, will never know: it is like a death of the soul) that real success will never come to me, and that I am as one who has fallen by the way. No one will realize better than yourself that in these days there is no corner anywhere for an old musician. I have literally nothing at all with which to keep a dear wife and two dear children and a dear young nephew, a war orphan, whom I have tried to befriend, except what I can pick up very occasionally as an accompanist at a local sing-song. My dear wife, who was of good family, is reduced to letting a room or two, but this does little more than provide our rent. And she is growing old too, and it breaks my heart to see her compelled to work like a charwoman at a time when she should be enjoying some repose. My daughter, I am glad to say, is in work at the moment, but it is ill paid, and there is nothing to spare for her family. The two dear boys have nothing, nothing. Things will improve, I am sure, but just at the moment we are in danger of losing our home—our only means of livelihood—if we cannot find a pound or two within a few days. That you may know who I am, and that I have written the simple truth, I enclose a press cutting, which I shall

be grateful if you will return, as it is a memento of times when I was more successful than now. . . .”

The press cutting was a subtle device, because the distinguished musician, though he might have been callous enough to throw the letter into the waste paper basket, could hardly be so cruel as to destroy the press cutting, the one ewe lamb; and it was difficult for him to return it to the poor writer without enclosing a small solatium as well.

The substance of Mr. Muswell's first letters had been tethered as near to the truth as might be: the later ones knew no such limitation. His creative fancy, enjoying its exercise, and developing with exercise, had come to conceive of the letters rather as graceful short stories than as renderings of fact; and it delighted to invent for the chief character in them, the "I" of the tales, experiences as varied as those of the hero of a magazine series. He fitted a letter to a correspondent as a tailor a suit. If it would please the gentleman, then Mr. Muswell had often played beneath the baton of his old friend, Sir Henry Wood; or he had been engaged by Sir Thomas Beecham as a soloist, before arthritis disabled his right arm; or he had broadcast frequently in the good old days at Savoy Hill. If his correspondent was a famous actor—and he had quickly discovered that actors were the most soft-hearted people in the world—then he had played in the orchestra pit during the actor's longest run, and so contributed his mite to that memorable success. Authors, he learned, gave far less than actors—they were a hard-hearted race—but if one of them had written a particularly high-minded work, then Mr. Muswell would say, "After reading your lovely book, I feel that you are one with the imagination to understand, and the heart to sympathize"; and he would submit a good opportunity for the author to put his principles into practice.

For so careless a man it was remarkable, the system he evolved for the proper dissemination of his appeals. He swept the columns of the papers for the names of likely patrons, and pencilled them into a twopenny notebook. The *Radio Times* he found particularly fruitful. In another twopenny notebook he kept the record, with five solemn tables, of his letters, their date, their character, and their yield (if any); and he found this fun. A little more, and he would have kept a card index.

§

He wrote three or four letters each day, and rested on Sundays. And it was a bad week that did not produce a ten shilling cheque,

or perhaps two. But there was one worry in the game ; the fear of his wife's eyes. That race to the doormat for the morning's letters, the necessity of whipping a suspicious envelope into his pocket, and the urgency of being in the house against the arrival of the later posts, became a brow-aching strain ; and it was not long before he wrote the letters from an accommodation address at a stationer's in Camberwell Green. Thereafter it was a pleasure to feel innocent when the postman rang, and to leave to his wife that disorderly rush to the doormat. He never knew, nor did anyone else, that she had early read the riddle. One of his envelopes, on a day when he was out, had been loose enough to undo ; and she had read the consolations of Mr. Percy Beal, a song writer, and studied his small cheque. At first she had been filled with a wrath that itched to explode over husband and children, but the long deliberations of a lonely day had changed the slant of her mind. Better say nothing about it. It would be difficult to explain her means of discovery ; and if Victor was getting money in this fashion, let him. It was all in the firm.

Mr. Muswell felt entitled to regard as pocket money all the proceeds of this private art, and he was not ungenerous with it to people outside the family. He spent some of it on drinks for his friends. On the evening of a profitable day he would order drinks with a large hand, as he sat in the saloon of the Prince of Wales, down at the bottom of the hill.

The writing of three or four letters exhausted him. Composition is always exhausting if it is in conflict with the desire to do something else. And Uncle Vic, by eleven of the morning, was being drawn, drawn, towards something else. A sufficiency of creation achieved, he went out on to Brixton Hill and, with his stick under his arm and his gloved hands behind his back, strutted with stately carriage towards the glowing possibilities of the stationer's shop. Happy they who walk in hope ! He enjoyed the outward journey, and if the first steps of the homeward journey were less happy, he soon brightened it with hopes of the morrow.

Business was now done for the day, and he would perhaps wander into the garden, where he enjoyed clipping and hoeing for a brief while, and rearranging the pebbles on the paths. Often Mrs. Muswell, cooking behind her conservatory window, would hear his husky secret spit, as he paused in his toil, or would watch him as he cast a guilty look at every window of the house, and then, satisfied that he was unobserved, retired behind a thick shrub, and bent his grey head. He was an indolent man.

She did not see—no one saw—another habit of his in the garden,

for he indulged it only after darkness had fallen. But it illustrated well that he was indeed a foiled, circuitous wanderer. He would wander out on to the garden paths, ostensibly to enjoy his pipe, but really to watch a window on the first floor. This was the window of a room let to a pretty young typist; and since it was a back room, and the garden was full of trees, and the spring night was warm, she would leave her window open and her blind up, as she dressed for her young man, or undressed for her bed. And Uncle Vic wandered among the trees with his pipe to enjoy what little might be vouchsafed him. This was not much. Usually he supped more on hope than on fulfilment, and was granted less of substance than of shadow.

His best hours, undoubtedly, were between half-past eight and half-past ten, when he sat or stood in the saloon of the Prince of Wales, where the company liked him. Here he had a public who listened to his tales and laughed at his wit, and treated him more and more generously as the night loosened their control and inflated their comradeship. Having a head like asbestos, he could take all that they offered him, and rarely became worse than witty, after three or four pints of bitter.

A little worse, sometimes, if his drinks had been mixed. One evening Roddy, returning from a solitary stroll, Fay being at the cinema, saw him emerging from the saloon doors of the Prince of Wales, just as the clock on Lambeth Town Hall chimed half-past nine; and he remarked with amusement that Uncle Vic's gait, though still stately, was certainly a little foiled and circuitous. He ran up. "Hallo, Uncle! Why, this is early for you, isn't it? It's only half-past nine."

Uncle Vic stopped and stared at him, and, without undue strain, recognized him. This accomplished, he digested his words carefully.

"Hah-past nine? Hah-past nine, Roddy?"

"Yes; that's right."

"Hah-past nine?"

The words sent his filmy eyes up to the tall clock tower on the Town Hall, where it vibrated a little on the other side of the Crossways.

"Hah-past nine?" In due time the clock tower steadied and the clock face endorsed the words. He was astonished.

"Hah-past nine!" said he. "Well! Hah-past nine, my dear boy! So it is. I heard the clock in there strike hah-past, and I thought it was hah-past ten, and closing time. And being law-abiding citizen I got up and paid my reckoning and came out

and it was only hah-past nine. Well! Thank you, my boy, thank you. They must still be in there, still. Thank you." And with a small grateful bow he left him and hurried back to the saloon doors.

IX

AGAINST Kennington Park there is an Old English Garden ; and here Roddy and Fay would meet.

Kennington Park is old. It was common land for centuries before they planted it with shrubs and planes, and put ornamental railings around it, and called it a park. Then it was a stretch of coarse and trampled grass, enclosed by wooden pales ; and the people grazed their cattle there, and the field preachers used it for a church, and the show folk for a fair ground with booths and caravans and swings, and the political demonstrators for a place of assembly with shouting and ranting and banners.

But the Old English Garden against its southern corner is new. Roddy had watched the housebreakers demolishing some old grey streets to make a place for the garden. He had watched the landscape gardeners laying the crazy pavement and digging the lily pond and erecting the pergola and the sundial at its end. He had watched them shaping the formal beds and bedding out the bulbs. And when in its first spring it had burst into colour, the tulips rising above a mist of forget-me-nots, the daffodils marching with the purple iris, the blossom crowding on the young trees, and the rose creeping along the pergola, he had fallen in love with it ; wherein he was a good Londoner, because the drab people of London are blindly faithful to flowers.

Often when he worked at Paget and Lamb's he had spent his dinner-hour there, sitting on a crescent-shaped seat, within a hedge of trimmed yew, and watching the girls from the factories, as they sat under the pergola in a broken sunlight and gabbled with shrill voices or munched their sandwiches and apples. And he had pictured a girl as pretty as they, and twice as sensible, who would sit with him here as a lover, and expunge for ever his solitude.

And now he would see her coming to find him, up the crazy pavement between the flower beds, and he could hardly believe his happiness. To have a girl of his own was not the unbelievable thing, but to have one as pretty as Fay. Sometimes he stared at her approaching figure, or at her smiling face as she sat at his side, and tried to savour the certainty that this happiness had

really come to him. With the soft foolishness of lovers they would call it "Our Garden," and Roddy would declare, "It's just made for you. Gosh, I wish I could paint you like you looked when you were coming by the pergola. Gosh, you're easily the prettiest flower here"; to which she would demur, "Don't be so absolutely potty"; but her eyes sparkled.

Or sometimes, delighting in the patterned garden before them, he would be moved to brag, "D'you know—it may be absolutely silly—but I sometimes think I must have had aristocratic ancestors who were used to gardens like this, because—I mean—I feel so completely at home here. It seems to answer to something in my blood. Of course, as you know, all the Stewarts claim to have royal blood in them, and you can imagine Charles I or Mary Queen of Scots in a garden like this"—and, immediately fearful lest he had been foolish, or lest he had hurt her, he hurried into modesty—"but it's all rot, I suppose, and we're nothing much, anyhow. And I suppose that if you go back far enough, you'll find that everybody's had *some* aristocratic ancestors. I'm sure *you* did. Nobody could have your eyes and nose and skin who didn't. I wonder who they were. I shouldn't be surprised if they were of Spanish extraction, really."

"I think they were Irish," said Fay, remembering the acclamations of her first lover, the curate.

"Yes, they mighta been that," admitted Roddy, learnedly.

"Father Sullivan always swore I must be Irish. He used to call me Cahtleen ni Houlihan, or something."

"Who on earth was she?"

"I don't know; but *he* was a darling. And awful fun. . . . Oh, they were fun, those days! *Darling* Father Sullivan! . . ."

Or, turning to her with a light of enthusiasm in his eyes, he would unload all his ambitions on to her lap, which was always a patient repository. "See here: I want to make quite a lot of money, and I'm jolly well going to. I'm damned if I'm going to spend all my life cutting other people's bacon. I don't want a terrible lot, mind you, but I do want enough to have a dignified sort of home, and a garden like this, and the chah'nst to travel. And," he added pompously, "I've always had a fancy to replace my family in the position where they belong. Yes, I'd like to do something for my auntie and uncle. And then, of course, I want to be able to give you everything you want, always."

"But when did I say I was going to marry you?" laughed Fay.

And though she had said the words laughingly, it suddenly went cold in the garden.

§

But if it was evening, and she came to find him in Lambeth Walk, they would turn into the Archbishop's Park, which lay but two streets away. The Archbishop's Park was old, too. It was as old as London. It was older, for it was as old as England. Except when it was under the tides, it had never been anything but a green meadow. It had never felt the shovel of the builder nor the dust of bricks. Once a pasture within the home park of Lambeth Palace, it had fed the episcopal herds, and doubtless many a crimson cardinal, and many a brocaded monarch, had come over the grass to admire the shy beasts, and discuss their points. I see Henry VIII examining a bull not unlike himself, and Elizabeth fondling the neck of a cow as she instructed Archbishop Parker on the Book of Common Prayer.

And into this place, rather sombre now with its asphalt paths and sooty shrubs and grey enclosing wall, would come Roddy and Fay, her arm in his, and her feet skipping happily; and they would sit on an iron seat and stare at the sunset striping the sky behind the tall ancient trees of the Archbishop's private grounds, and the battlements of his palace. To the right, across the sunset, rose the turrets of St. Thomas's Hospital, and, noblest of all (as it seemed to them), the Victoria Tower of the Houses of Parliament, and the Gothic-framed clock-face of Big Ben.

"Funny," said Roddy one day, staring at the sunset, "but a cuppla months ago before we—well"—and he stuttered and blushed—"before we met properly, and you let me kiss you, a sky like that always made me feel kind of unhappy—or both happy and unhappy, if you see what I mean. Now it only makes me colossally happy. D'you get me, sort of?"

"Oh yes, I think I know what you mean," she said, and leaned against him in gratitude.

His arm gripped her like something he dared not lose, and her eyes strayed to the grass plots, and they let silence wrap them. Insulated by their thoughts, they heard nothing of the low symphony of London playing endlessly around them: the sigh of traffic beyond the park walls, the hooting of tugs on the river, the shouts of children on playgrounds far away, and the steps of girls tapping homeward along the asphalt paths.

And their thoughts insulated them, not only from the murmur of London, but from the approach of each to the other. Though linked, they were alone.

The evening chilled, and he jumped up, and drew her to her

feet, and turned to go out by the northern gate. And she, not knowing his purpose, walked with him for many paces, hanging on his arm, and chattering and laughing; till suddenly, seeing the corner where the grey walls met, she asked, "Where are you going? Roddy, where are we going?"

"Out this way for a change. That's all."

She stopped. She unhooked her arm. "Oh no. . . . No, not that way."

"Why?"

"Oh, never mind why. Never mind now; but please don't let's go that way."

"Why ever not?"

"Because—oh, because I just hate that part. It's hateful. *Please.*" And, putting her arm back in his, she swung him round. "Please, please come the other way. Be a jewel and do what your Fay asks. It isn't often that she kind of asserts herself, is it? Bless her. Bless her for a really nice child."

"Righto, my priceless. But I still don't see why one gate should terrify you more than another. Honest, I don't."

And as they went back along the path, he tried to remember what lay beyond the northern gate. Only a dull street, and then a long dark tunnel under the viaduct, and then—then what?—why, then the long noisy thoroughfare called Lambeth Lower Marsh. A poor part, perhaps, and rather gloomy; but hardly worse, as far as he could remember, than some of the streets that lay around her own Vauxhall.

§

However exultant this new experience of sitting with his own lover in the parks, soon it was not enough. It was too open and public. Soon he was longing to lie with her, pressing her against him, where no one could see. Nothing more. There was too much of Mrs. Muswell's respectability in him, too much timidity, and too much reverence, to allow him to contemplate anything more. But this much he contemplated daily, and his body ached for it. Other boys had it: boys with their own cars, boys with spare parlours and smiling parents, boys who lived within reach of the open hills and woods. But he! He never had a full Sunday with Fay, never a whole half-day, never time enough to get beyond the last brickly miles of London. And where in all these multitudinous streets and populous parks and commons was there a corner

where he could lie with Fay? He began to hunt for it. Every night when he was not with her, it was a second-best happiness, though sometimes shot through with shame, to wander along the roads, hunting, hunting. It was because all these hunting grounds were dusty and without beauty that he felt ashamed. Strange—strange that it should seem fitting and sweet to lie with a girl in a shady wood or friendly parlour, and furtive and dubious to draw her down behind the sullen shrubs of a common or the ungracious hoarding of a wasteground. Too often, as he creased his brow over this, he remembered Pete Berry in the wood, and something in him shook and was unhappy.

He found nowhere till a night when frustrated desire turned into desperate resolve. That night he was mooching in her streets, waiting for her to come out of her house; and a light rain began to fall. It sprinkled disappointment and anger on a mixture within him that was already explosive enough, and he stamped on the pavement. "Oh, it's not fair," he told himself, "it's just not fair. I'm not going to stand with her under a railway arch all night, with everything spoiled by a wretched fear that she's getting tired or bored. I'm going to lie in peace with her somewhere, just holding her close and kissing her, and not trying to talk at all. I should be happy and at rest like that, and so would she—I know it. She's always happiest when she's just smiling up at me, or shutting her eyes, as I make love to her. Oh, my darling!" His body stirred at the remembrance. "I'm going to find somewhere where we can lie and make love together to-night. I'm going to find it in the next five minutes."

He was in Burnett Street as he vowed this; and he started off as if a whip had flicked him. An idea came upon him that if he let instinct lead him, he would walk on to the very place. He turned into Gye Street, and the first thing he came to was the gate of a school playground. "St. Peter's Senior Mixed School. 1868. Ages 11 to 14." This had been Fay's school: often as they passed it, she had pointed to the rooms where she used to sit, and the asphalt playground where she used to skip or play wall-cricket or run screaming at cross-touch. He tried the gate. Locked, of course. For one second he halted there, looking at the slate-grey playground, and picturing Fay, at eleven years old, skipping and dancing on it, with her ragged black fringe in her eyes. It was a pity that no stranger came along the pavement, whether peering scholar or visiting ghost, to tell him (for he had a heart to respond to the mystery of it) that this hard, tarry playground lay precisely over the floor of the old Rotunda, and that therefore Fay had danced over the grave of an ancient liveliness, when the gay patrons of Vauxhall had sat there to watch a fantoccini show, before roaming out to the Dark Walks to find a solitude in

which to make love. Roddy roamed on down the pavement, looking for the same. And at the end of Gye Street, facing him, he saw the grimy arches of the viaduct.

Only two of these arches are used as alleyways, and they are called, though their names stir no memories now in the people who hurry through them, Spring Gardens Walk and Vauxhall Walk. All the others are built up or barricaded so as to be used for warehouses, forges, bottle stores, scrap-metal dumps, and coal-wagon sheds. Roddy walked along them, peeping through cracks in their boarding or through holes in their grimed windows. He tried the handles of doors and pulled at padlocks.

And at length he came to one which must be empty since it had "To Let" chalked on its dark match-boarding. Squinting through a knot-hole in the wood, he saw that it had once been a packing store: its floor was still cumbered with crates and casewood and with mountains of wood-shavings and straw. The sight speeded up his heart. So then: he had been right. Fate had really guided his steps! The assurance stiffened his courage. Glancing up and down the street, he saw that it was deserted in the rain and gathering dark. He shook the wooden door. Only a light lock held it. One more glance up and down, and he lifted his foot, and kicked his heel at the door. It burst open at once. Guilt quickening ingenuity, he left the door ajar and moved up the street to its blind end, where he stopped and lit a cigarette. Pulling innocently at the cigarette, he strolled back, feigned surprise at an open door, and turned idly through it. Once within the shadowy vault, he built the shavings and the straw into a bed, his heart racing at the thought of exultation to come, and shaking as he remembered Pete Berry in the wood. Only to hold her: no more. But oh, as he made his bed, how he understood Pete and pitied him! If only Pete had had a Fay to heal his hunger he would have been safe. So insecure were we all! When would people understand, and have compassion, and forgive?

His bed made, he came out to find his bedfellow. He found her waiting at the corner of her street, under the slow rain; and he cried with a laugh, "Sorry I'm late, but I've been looking for somewhere where we can shelter, and I've found a topping place. It's really rather jolly. A secret cave! Come along." And he brought her to the door of that dark little tunnel. "It's not our fault, my heart, if people leave their doors open. Come in. Come in, lady."

She was in, pretending to laugh; and he kicked the door to.

In the sudden darkness she was afraid, both of the place and of him, but this, as he drew her to him, only heightened his pleasure in her. And he kissed and kissed her till she loved him enough

to let him draw her down on to the straw. And there for a few hours they were as happy as those who lie together in the hay with a summer-lit landscape around them. Only the trains, roaring and rattling above them, as the shells from an enemy roar, disturbed at times the happiness in that dark vault, till it gathered around them again.

X

It seemed that in Roddy's story one strand at least must be the same as in his Uncle Vic's: he would remain to the end a dreamer rather than a creator. Where in the world was there any reason why it should not be so? Roddy, though as lively and vital as his labour would allow, had not more energy than Uncle Vic had, when he too was young and vigorous; and he had less education and even narrower opportunities. And Uncle Vic had a small spring of original genius; Roddy had not: he had only ambition. His creative fount was the same as the next boy's: it came from the top-soil, and not from the depths.

He had done nothing so far to create his dreams. It was so much easier to dream than to do. And he had plenty of excuses for not starting yet. What time had he? Not a minute between breakfast at seven and supper at eight; and after supper his body and brain were tired. And it still seemed as if all time stretched before him, and anything might happen one day. Though he posed before Fay as a man of the world, he was still, at twenty, a wondering and trusting schoolboy.

But now that one desire had been so joyously fulfilled by Fay, and since the joy brought with it a nervous companion, the fear of its loss, he began to give thought to the means of achieving greatness. He must really start now on the road to prosperity and fame. This other desire must no longer drift over a hundred fields like the unwall'd tide of the river: it must be embanked and sent down a chosen channel. But what channel?

"Yes, what." When not walking with Fay, he walked with this question. His eyes remote, and his body bumping into people, he walked the South London roads, trying to see a line of least resistance in which the strong desire could run.

Could he be a great musician? No: this would need a long and costly training and daily hours of practice. A singer, applauded by vast audiences? No; the same obstacles blocked this path.

An architect, a painter, a sculptor? No: his head shook as he crossed a road, and was nearly knocked over by a taxi. No: he could rule these out: they too required more training, more time, and more house-room than a grocer's lad could come by. Let it be understood that he did not doubt that he could have done any of these things, had he had the money, the time, and the house-room.

A great athlete—a cricketer, say, slogging the ball out of Kennington Oval into Harleyford Road, while a multitude shouted deliriously? No: here, and here only, perhaps, he was humble. He admitted that he hadn't the skill, and would never have it.

Well, what else was there? A first conclusion he came to was this: only those with money and time could become musicians, singers, painters, or architects, but anyone could act, speak, write, or found a religion. Could he perhaps be an actor, a politician, or a prophet? An actor? No: he remembered and admitted the racking nervousness that descended upon him and possessed him like a devil, if he tried to speak in public. (He could have been a great actor, of course, if this miserable stage-fright hadn't forbidden it.) And the same recoil from public speech eliminated both the politician and the prophet. A pity, because he would have liked to be a dictator, with the world's eyes turned towards him; and he would have liked to have churches and chapels named after him in the city streets of the world. And he never read of Disraeli or Joe Chamberlain, in the one sphere, or Luther, Wesley, Mrs. Eddy, or Mahomet, in the other, without thinking that, but for this one weakness, he could have done much the same as they. One weakness only? No: in moments of clear sight he discerned another: the weakness of wanting to be liked. Built as he was, he could never have endured the criticism, the hostility, the misunderstanding, and the ridicule that would have been hurled at his platform or his pulpit.

A writer? Ah, here was something. Here was something that required no training. Here was something that needed neither capital equipment nor house-room, but could be done at odd times in a corner. Here was something that asked no public appearance but achieved excellent, world-wide results. Had he found his channel? Was a vista opening before him? He believed it was.

What should he write?

This ill-educated boy had a response to beauty, and delighted to create forms that his raw taste thought lovely, but his drive towards an art, none the less, was much more the need to impress himself upon the world (and upon the Muswells) than the urge to create a thing for its own sake; and

so he decided that he would write only those things that brought fame and wealth. Plays, or light novels, or lyrics for popular songs.

The decision to write came upon him one day in the Wandsworth Road. And from that day he no longer strolled the streets in his free hours (unless with Fay), but sat at his dressing-table bent over a writing pad, or paced between bed and window, stirring up the ideas and jotting them down. And in the slack hours at Hodson and Cooper's, standing between counter and shelves, he would rummage the shelves of his mind for plots and fine words. Needless to say, he did not perceive that the one interesting subject was all around him: in the street, in the shop, in the eating house, and in the homes on Brixton Hill. He could not conceive of anyone wanting to read about the too familiar environment of a grocer's hand. Instead, he raised his romantic fabrics on ground of which he knew nothing. He staged his plots in leafy hamlets, in Mayfair rooms, and in the Wild West. And, cast adrift from education at fourteen, at the very time when he would have begun to perceive, to possess, and to rejoice, he still held the schoolboy's (and the solicitor's) notion that the longer and more portly the words the finer the style. He knew nothing of modesty and quietness in the use of words. Understatement and child-like simplicity would have seemed to him absurd. He prided himself on his ponderous syllables, and collected with delight the resounding clichés that he found in the editorial columns of the newspapers and in the speeches of Cabinet Ministers.

With much labour and conflict he completed a short story called "Thingumy," and thought it a masterpiece. When he had written the last words, he rose from his bedroom chair and knew all those emotions, all that blend of exultation and sorrow, which Gibbon knew when he had set down the last words of his history. He dreamed of instant recognition and acclaim. Good God, was fame at the door?

It was an appalling story; and it is of interest now only as a window into the unconscious places of its author's mind. Thingumy was a foundling in a camp out west (a camp of miners, or gold-diggers, or cowboys—the author himself was not clear which) and, because he had neither parents nor name, the brutal miners (or cowboys) dubbed him "Thingumy" and would kick him aside, telling him that he was "in the way." One particularly brutal giant called Moose Jaw took a delight in whipping him (Roddy was always strangely excited when he described Moose Jaw whipping the boy; he wrote easily and quickly then). And having whipped him, and tossed away the cowhide switch, he would say, "Now get out. We're sick of you, always in the way." So when

Thingumy grew up, he got out. He ran away and became an outlaw on the prairie, and a company of derelicts gathered around him, and he trained them in the ways of nobility and the honour of the outlaw. And one day Moose Jaw, riding home from his crimes, was ambushed by another band of freebooters, who roped him to a tree, and arrayed a firing squad in front of him. (Again the strong creative excitement.) But just when all was in order for the execution, Thingumy came galloping over the hill. He cried, "Stop!" and dismounted, and parleyed with the captain. Then he came to Moose Jaw's side. "So ho!" he taunted him. "This time you found someone else in the way! These men will not hand you over to me to do with you as I like, but they have given me the privilege of giving the signal to fire. Well, now you shall see something." He raised his arm high. "When I lower this arm to the level of my shoulder, yonder men will fire; and they are not men who miss their mark." Moose Jaw cursed him, but Thingumy only smiled mysteriously. Slowly he lowered his arm. The shots rang out, echoing among the rocks, but instead of Moose Jaw falling like a sack over his ropes, a youthful figure lay dead at his feet, "for," concluded the story, "Thingumy had stepped in the way."

Surely this was a wonderful idea, and embellished with glittering words. Surely the first editor would accept it. Surely a film company would swoop upon it—and sometimes they paid thousands for a film story! Fancy seeing it on the screen at the Red Domes with Fay! He sent it off to a magazine that night, so ungovernable his impatience. Though knowing it should be typed, he sent it handwritten, because he believed it fine enough to triumph over a default like that. In his covering letter, a stilted composition, he begged the editor, should he not see fit to publish the story, to return it within a week, so that it could be submitted elsewhere. As the packet dropped into the pillar box on Brixton Hill, his warm happiness and excitement, beneath the sapphire night, were almost as great as when Fay leaned against him on the bridge, because he believed that now his second ambition was coming close to him too. The night air in his throat sparkled like wine.

The manuscript did not come back in a week, so he felt sure they had accepted it. How could they do anything else? He said nothing of his hope to the family or to Fay, because he longed to surprise them. And for four months he looked for each post, hoping it would bring the letter of enthusiastic approval and acceptance. For four months he bought the magazine and fumbled its pages hastily, hoping to see his story somewhere. He never lost hope. He always found reasons why they could not print it at once. He stayed anchored on the memory that they had not

sent it back. And when one morning he saw on the hall mat his own stamped-and-addressed envelope, fat with a rejected manuscript, he took a bullet in his heart like the bullet that killed Thingumy.

XI

SLOWLY the forces converged that drove Roddy Stewart and Fay Warren to marry. They were forces within them and forces without ; but though the forces within were the strongest stresses, yet the final thrust came from without : it came from that dark quarter which Fay had always feared. It came like a shell and detonated in her world.

Roddy wanted to marry her from the first. Every force in his nature compelled him to hold her. First, his desire to love and possess something beautiful and affectionate was satisfied completely by Fay—or as completely as any desires are satisfied in this world. Then his desire to *be* someone urged him to strut through the world as a married man, with a wife whom all would envy him. Then there was his indestructible self-confidence. He took other stunning disappointments after the rejection of "Thingummy," but they did not shake his belief in his powers. Had not all geniuses been neglected at first ? He did not lose faith in himself, because he dared not. Instead he felt pity for the editors, and imagined their chagrin and self-reproach one day. And his disappointments were assuaged by the frequent publication of his letters in the *Brixton Free Press* or the *South London Chronicle*. Generally these were letters supporting the Conservative cause in the most sonorous phrases he knew. Their words were as substantial and rotund as their syntax was ailing. Their publication yielded no money, but at least it showed that the editors thought well of his wisdom and approved his style ; and it was a high pleasure to show them to the Muswells and to Fay. And Fay, beyond question, was impressed by his scholarship. This same self-confidence—or compulsive need to be sanguine—would not let him doubt Fay's love. He dared not. She might hesitate and demur sometimes in a way that hurt him sharply ; she might say, jumping merrily at his side, "But I don't know that I *want* to marry before I've had some fun. Why can't we stay as we are ?" thereby worrying his brow with the thought, "She doesn't want me like I want her" ; but he always routed the fear by recalling the times, and they were many, when she had been passionate in her love-making. Nor would this sanguineness accept the warnings of aunt and uncle. Mrs. Muswell might say that it was absurd to marry on thirty-five shillings a week, and that even if Fay earned

money too, "the children will come; they always do"; but he told himself they wouldn't come to him, and, anyhow, he was going to make big money one day. No other thought was tolerable. Uncle Vic might give him confidences and avowals of a most intimate nature (and enjoy them), but Roddy believed it was going to be different for him.

And along with this sanguineness, its obverse face, went his apprehensiveness till he had got her securely. The more dubious his chance of attaining one ambition, the more compulsive his need to complete the other.

§

In Fay the currents ran less strongly. They were broken and troubled by rocky hesitations which she dared not tell to Roddy, because she was too gentle to hurt him. How could she say aloud that, while at times she loved him passionately, and was radiantly happy to think that she had found what she sought, at other times she lost all her assurance, and was unhappy? How could she admit that sometimes her desire to be in love, and to say passionate and lovely things, caused her to speak more fervently than she felt? How could she suggest that, at such and such a time, she had spoken more as an artist than as a lover? She could not: she was the prisoner of her own pity. Worst of all, how could she confess that she sometimes asked herself whether with her capital of beauty she couldn't buy something better than Roddy? He was a gentleman, he was nice-looking, he was always considerate and kind, and he adored her as she had always wanted to be adored, but—his job! Oh, if only he'd get out of it into something more classy, she'd hardly doubt any more. Fay was as frightened of injuring her great hope as Roddy was anxious to consolidate his.

The buried and basic thing in Fay, as in Roddy, was fear. She was now at the New Olympic Cinema in Walworth Butts. It was a grander place than the Red Domes, with a finer uniform, a better staff-room, and two-and-sixpence more pay. But it was colder, more mechanical, more impersonal: a huge, inhospitable fane. And it represented the last thing she could achieve in her profession. No goal lay beyond her now, unless it was the cash box, and a half-crown more a week. It was disturbing, to be at a dead-end at nineteen. Moreover, the work itself was beginning to play upon two of her greatest fears. Would it damage her looks? Was it true, as all the girls maintained, that they had to make up more and more heavily, as their skins sallowed in the darkness and foul air? And oh, would it—*would* it—make her more liable to . . . ?

One of the girls had died of it. Ted . . . Ted dying day by day in his bedroom at the back. . . . Oh God, not that : please, please !

And her birthday came, and she "turned twenty"; and in Tyers Street, if you are not married by twenty-one, you begin to be afraid. You lose prestige; and prestige, though she did not know it, was the name of Fay's desire. Gracie, her younger sister, and only eighteen, was already married to Wally Bates, a respectable young stone-cutter of Kennington Cross, in good work. And she, Fay, was just waiting—waiting because she doubted if Roddy, a real gentleman, was good enough for her !

But it was not selfish fears only that spun the skein. A real fondness for Roddy was at work too. He stirred her desires often; and he had stocked her memory with shared laughter and happiness and fun. He had tied her to him with a rope that would be difficult to tear. One strand of the rope was his attraction for her; another their memories; and another her pity for him. "I dunno . . . I guess I've got myself tied up with him somehow," she would think behind her large, grave eyes. "I dare say I mighta done better, but I'm really terrifically fond of him now, and there it is . . ."

§

Such the forces within; what of those without ?

An enormous one rose within her own home. Its name was the Means Test. Her father, in his fifties, had lost his work. He had wandered from office to office, and from foundry to foundry, seeking someone to take back "the key of the street" which Messrs. Duffield and Winsell had handed to him; but no one had taken it back. Six months dragged by; his unemployment insurance ran out; and into his life, and into Fay's life, suddenly, unforeseen, uncomprehended, panic-striking, like an assaulting iceberg, came the Means Test.

Ernie Warren, for fifty years a sturdy and most sententious Tory, was so shocked that he turned overnight into a Socialist, and a hot and voluble one too. He who had always "stood up for God" abolished Him the same day as he looked upon the Means Test, and thereafter trampled on His fragments in street and parlour and pub. He who had been a loud ribald joker now modified his laughter, and was often morose. And you should have heard his daughter Fay gabbling into Roddy's ear the family dismay, without a thought for the refinements of speech.

"Whoever heard? Proper daft, I call it. So far as I can make out, so long as I'm at home, the Unemployment Assistance people won't give Dad hardly anything because they say I can help to

keep him, but if I go off and get married or something, they'll give him his benefit and I can keep what I earn for myself. Didjer ever hear anything like it? It's practically arstin' a girl to clear out. And it's so *wrong*, I call it! Dad's always worked hard and well, and for little enough, Heaven knows, and he's as fit and ready now to work as ever he was, and if they can't give him any work to do, well, what I mean is, that's their funeral and not his children's. Not that I mean I don't want to help Dad and Mum all I can always, but it seems I can help 'em just as well by clearing out."

And Roddy agreed with her, and enjoyed being the sympathizing, consoling, supporting male. Nor did he fail to see his opportunity and to leap upon it. "Yes, clear out, darling. Clear out, I should. Clear out, and come to me. Gee whiz, Fay, we'd do fine on my thirty-five bob and your twenty-seven. Gee, I reckon it might be just perfect."

"I dunno. . . . I dunno about that," mused Fay. "But it might be all right. . . ."

And then one day, even as they walked and talked together, the decisive thing began to take shape in the dark quarter. While Roddy and Fay talked, three other people were talking. They were talking in a room in Mordern Street. One voice was angry, one sycophantic, and one pleading.

"E's got it coming to 'im, that's what 'e 'as," shouted Bill Every. "It was a liberty—a bloody liberty."

"O' course it was!" snorted Ken Every, his brother. "If ever there was a liberty, *that* was." And he added with conviction, "Yurse."

"He meant no harm," submitted Vi Every, her eyes on her sewing.

"He *did*! He bloody well *did*! What you talking about? Meant no 'arm'—Gawd, he meant to come into me own house and threaten me, like; and he did; and that's something I don't take from anyone, see. It's a liberty."

"O' course it is," agreed Ken.

"He only thought he was acting like a brother should," continued Vi. "He *is* my brother, after all. . . . Oh, for God's sake stop fidgiting like that, Arty. What are you doing with that cup? Leave it alone, can't you: you'll smash it before you done." This was to a boy of six with a running nose, who was leaning against the table and racing a teacup (which was a fire engine) up and down between the cups, plates, jugs, and other traffic to a conflagration in the sugar basin. "Run out, Arty, and play with your sisters. They're out there somewhere. Go on, there's a good boy." But the child didn't move. He was happy.

"No one's going to come the high-and-mighty brother over me, I don't mind telling you that," Bill reiterated, determined that his wife's interest should not be diverted from his grievance to young Arty. "No one comes threatening me, and gets away with it. 'E's got it coming to 'im, if ever anyone had."

"Damned if I'd fall for it," murmured Ken.

"What's he got coming to him?" demanded Vi, looking up from her needle.

They were sitting in a ground-floor room whose window looked on to the pavement. You could not call it a front room, because the house was only one room thick. It was one room thick, and three rooms high: below this room, in a half-basement, was the kitchen; above it a bedroom; and these were all the rooms in the house. All the rooms were of the same size, about ten foot square and eight foot high, except the cellar-like kitchen, which was so low that no tall man could stand erect in it. A staircase, narrow and steep, crept up and down a darkness by the side of the three rooms; and it was separated from this ground-floor room by no more than a wooden partition. The kitchen had two windows, one looking into a pit beneath the pavement grating, and seeing nothing, and the other into the sunken backyard, whose further wall was not six feet away. Huddled in this narrow bear-pit was the wash-house and the privy. This ground-floor room had only a front window; and, to be sure, no more was necessary to light so small a space. Vi Every, Fay's sister, Bill Every, her husband, Ken Every, his brother, and the child playing amongst the cups were sharing the space with a bed, some chairs, and a table.

This, more than any other, was the living-room; and it certainly had the aspect which some call "lived in." It had it to excess. The wall-paper, stained and smoke-darkened, hung down in dog-ears; and the ceiling, beneath the impacts of life, had dropped portions of its plaster and revealed its laths. All the furniture had been lived on till it was nearly dead; and on the table at the moment were the scatterings of the last meal, including a loaf, a teapot, a jam jar, and a salmon tin with a knife in it. In the close air a sensitive nostril might have distinguished three interweaving smells; a smell of the country, coming from under the bed where Bill had stored some of his cabbages, potatoes, and apples; the smell of paraffin which Vi had applied to the bed-posts and wall-cracks against the movement of bugs; and the original sour stench which is the basic smell of all such rooms and upholds in its texture all smaller smells.

Bill sat on the edge of the bed, loudly proclaiming that it was a liberty; Ken sat on a stiff chair, quietly echoing him; and Vi

sat in the only easy-chair, mending a pair of Bill's trousers, or stopping to look sadly at the stringy rug against the fender.

"Yes, he's got it coming to 'im," said Bill. "You make no doubt about it: got it coming to him soon. By Jesus, I should think so!"

Bill had once been a metal worker, but after two spells of prison for violent resistance to the police, he had to make his living by the hawking of perishable goods. Though small, he had once been very good-looking, and his good looks had won him Vi Warren; but tonight, with his slack and sullen mouth, his dulled eyes that only anger was brightening, his unkempt hair hanging down over his forehead, and his white choker knotted round his neck, he looked a fit inhabitant of Mordern Street.

Vi was quite unlike Fay in bodily shape, being a wide-shouldered, large-breasted, short-legged little person; but she was rather like her in face. Though eight years older, and harrowed and drained by Mordern Street, she still had the full cheeks and large wistful eyes of a girl.

Ken Every was his brother over again, but in a yet weaker brew. He had the same good looks spoiled by selfish and sensual thought, the same disorderly hair, and slackened, sagging mouth; but his eyes, and indeed his whole figure, were yet more slothful and inert. The eyes had hardly any light at all. You felt, and his talk confirmed your feeling, that here was one who preferred to be violent by proxy. Even now his relaxed and lazy mouth was lapping a dead cigarette.

It was a hot July night, and the noises of Mordern Street came in through the window; the beat of hurrying feet, the shouting of children at play, the cheerful shriek of a woman to her friend across the road, and the distant laughter of men.

You will not find Mordern Street now. Only a half-furlong away, in the great white palace where the government of London sits, was a map in a book; and on this map the whole Mordern Street area, east of the Lower Marsh, was shaded blue and black. Not pink like the middle-class district of Brixton; nor purple like the poor but respectable district of Tyers Street; but blue and black, which meant that it was ripe for clearance, because its dwellings were old and unfit, and most of its people lived below the poverty line (blue) and some of them indulged in crime (black). Already the housebreakers have begun their work, and all that is left of Vi's house is the basement kitchen open to the sky by a mound of rubble. If you are quick you might find among the rubble the chips and splinters of the room in which they were sitting on this warm July night. Then the street was a brief, straight road, fairly wide as a whole, but with sidewalks as narrow as the peoples lives. And straight up from the sidewalks rose terraces of uniform

houses. And because the cornices of these terraces ran straight against the sky, hiding the chimneys, their façades looked like grey prison walls, pierced by windows and doors. For some reason, and God knows what, each alternate window space in the upper row (the space that should have lit the staircase) was bricked instead of glazed, thereby adding blankness, and a kind of one-eyed blindness, to the walls. Between the flagged sidewalks the roadway ran black; it was of tarmac, and it would soften under the feet and clutch them when the sun was hot. A school ended the brief vista at one end, and a warehouse at the other.

The only bright things in Mordern Street this evening (apart from the children and the cheery women and the laughing men) were certain clean white notices pasted at intervals on the houses. Very new, they were headed, "Housing Act, 1936," and announced that this street, and its neighbours, were scheduled for early demolition, and what about it?—let the people say. Aye, they were clean, white things in that street.

"What's he got coming to him?" repeated Vi anxiously.

Bill tossed his head and evaded the question. "He come in here and talked to me as if I was dirt. Shouted at me, he did. Talked about givin' me a hidin', as if I was a kid at school, and he the head teacher, or something. God blast his soul!" The more Bill thought of it, the less he could stomach it. "Who the hell does he think he is? Just because he makes his four pound a week, he thinks he can come and learn me how to manage me own home."

"A cheek." Ken spat out a flake of tobacco. "That's what it is. A cheek."

"I wish he'd never come near the place," sighed Vi, lifting up her work again. "But he meant well. He thought he was my brother."

"Yes, and I'm your husband; and he's got no rights over you at all. Absolutely none. That's the Law. He's got no rights whatever to set foot in my house, nor order me about, neither. What I do in me own home is me own business."

"It was Interference; you can't get away from that," said the echo, lippping its dead cigarette.

"Yes, and I'm sick and tired of your family poking their noses in here and interferin'. Your dad's always spyin' on me, like."

"He isn't! It's ages since he come here."

"Well, I don't like the way he looks at me when he does come. I don't mind telling you I don't. It isn't friendly: it's not what you might call friendly."

"That's nonsense," said Vi.

"Oh, is it? Well, I don't think it is, see. He somehow makes me feel as if he didn't think much of me really, and I don't like it, see. How's he better than me, anyway?"

"He isn't," assured Ken.

"He's out o' work, a'nt he? He's on Unemployment Assistance, a'nt he? And he's likely to stay there, as fur as I can see; and I'm makin' me own livin'. I reckon I done darn well, considerin'. I labour night and day to keep the home goin'. Aht all weathers, shah'ting meself hoarse, to make a home for you and the nippers." And he turned to his brother. "I make thirty-five bob in a good week."

"That's darn good, I reckon . . . considerin'."

Vi lifted her eyes and looked at the window. "Steve wasn't talking about — Arty, I thought I told you to run out and play. *Will* you do what you're told, now! Do you want me to smack you?"

The child at the table swung his body to and fro, and pouted.

"Get out, you little swine!" shouted his father. "You do what your ma tells you, or I'll lam you, I will."

Shrinking from the shout, the child ran from the room.

"There's no call to shout at him like that, Bill. You frighten him. . . . Steve wasn't talking about what you earn, but about what you done."

"Well, and what've I"—he hesitated—"what've I done?"

"*You* know."

The light from the window, shining in Vi's eyes as she said this, was transmuted into sadness. They were Fay's large eyes, but what was pensiveness in Fay's eyes was pain in her sister's.

"Well, it's no business of his, anyhow." Bill's mouth squared sulkily. "And I'll lay *he* gets his rag out sometimes, and lands one at his missus. I a'nt often done it, have I?"

"I'm sure Steve never done it. He'd never hit a lady, not even if she *was* his wife."

"Oh, no! Steve's a howlin' gent, and I'm just a dirty stinker, I am. None of your family ever done anything wrong. A bloke must lose his temper *sometimes*, mustn't he, Ken? He can't *always* be a howlin' saint, I mean."

"Course he can't. It's only natural, sometimes."

"But it's not nice to strike a lady on the breast, Bill, and you can't say it is."

"I admit I lost me temper. I've admitted it, haven't I? I can't do more. But that's not to say I'll take threats of a hidin' from any Steve on God's earth. Hidin' from *him*! Christ! I reckon I'm as fond of Vi as Steve is of his missus any day of the week. You know that, don't you, Ken? I reckon I've stuck by her. I always say that, though we may have our tiffs, she's the only woman for me. I've said it a thah'sand times. And *he* to come in and tell me to treat her properly! Come into this very room and say it to me face! God's caution, I'll shut his trap

for him! I wish I'd done it then. I woulda done right enough, only I was so taken aback I didn't know what I was doin'. Clean taken aback, I was! And before I could learn him a thing or two, he'd gawn."

"It was a liberty," said Ken.

"Of course it was. And the bloke that takes a liberty with me doesn't stay chuckling over it long. I can't think why I let him get away with it. It gets my goat, to think of his gettin' away with it. It's worried me all day."

"Well, why the hell don't you have it out with him?" asked Ken.

"That's what I'm going to do. That's what I'm sayin'."

"Yes. Knock his block off," said Ken.

Vi sighed again, as she stitched. Alarm had stirred in her, but she had quenched it with the thought that Steve was a much bigger man than Bill, and in twice his condition. Unwisely she let the edge of this thought appear. "I shouldn't try any games with Steve. Steve's a big man."

"What? D'you think I'm afraid of him? She's callin' me a c'ard now. Jesus Christ, she's callin' me a c'ard! God's lummy, I'll take off me coat to Steve any day."

"Well, go and tell him so," urged Ken. "I reckon it's up to him to take back what he said, or to take what's comin' to him."

"So do I. So do I; straight."

"I'll come with you, if you like. Gaw lummy, I'm your brother, a'nt I, as much as he's Vi's."

"I've a good mind to go this very night."

"Righto! I'll come."

"What? Now?" Bill's eyes stared. It is always confusing to be asked to act on your words too promptly. His mouth hung open, as if waiting for a further draught of encouragement.

"Yes. Why ever not?" And Ken spat out a last flake, stuck the damp cigarette behind his ear, and heaved himself up.

"Where's the sense of waitin'?"

"Christ, I will! I'll go now!"

"Bill!" Vi's alarm was alive again. "Bill, what are you going to do?"

"You shut up. You stop here. This is my business, I reckon."

"Oh, Bill! Don't have a row with Steve. Please don't. . . . Oh, why on earth did he come?"

"Shut up! Leave me be. He started it, and he's bloody well goin' on with it. Where'll we find him, d'you suppose, Ken?"

"We'll find him, all right."

"No, Bill, please don't." Vi was on her feet now, her work dropped to the stringy rug, her hands holding Bill. "Oh, Ken, why do you encourage him like that? Bill, don't have a row with Steve. You know what you are——"

"Give over, I tell you!" shouted Bill, pushing her off roughly. "Come on, Ken."

"Oh, Bill! Oh dear, oh dear . . . *Bill!* . . ." But they had picked up their caps and slouched from the room. She saw their figures pass the window, as she stood where they had left her, with her fingers at her mouth. "Oh, what'll he do?" Wild ideas visited her of rushing to Steve's house in Camberwell to warn him that they were coming for trouble. But how could she? How get all the way to Camberwell at this time of night, with the children to see to, and all? "Oh dear . . ." And how was she to find him, if there was nobody at home? Oh, perhaps they'd not find him, neither—or they'd cool down in the night air. "Oh God, don't get 'em fighting. You know what Bill is." Should she nip on her hat and run to her father? But what could *he* do? And he'd be in some pub, anyway.

Dazed and defeated, she went to the door. They were already gone from the brief street. She saw only her children playing in the roadway and the gutter. She lifted her hands from her sides despairingly, and let them fall again. "Come in, Arty," she shouted, converting her bafflement into irritability with the children. "Arty, come *in*, I tell you! Ruthie and Fay, come in, can't you? It's time for your bed. Oh dear, oh dear, why don't you come when I call?"

XII

FIVE roads meet at Kennington Cross, and four of them lead to the bridges, and one to the hills. This, perhaps, is why the public house which stands at one of the corners, and stares down Lower Kennington Lane, is called the Packhorse.

About ten years ago, Messrs. Carter and Paton, Brewers, rebuilt the old Packhorse Hotel, and now its façade is very much in the modern mood. It is severely honest. Curving round the corner, its bare, brick walls attempt no adornment except such as comes from shapely and well-placed windows and doors. Its bricks are London stock bricks, and pretend to be nothing else. Unblackened as yet by London smut, they are as yellow as the pale clay in which their foundations sit. Standing firmly in the twentieth century, the Packhorse (Carter and Paton's Ales) has the beauty of fitness to site and function.

But pass through the tavern doors, pass through the thickness of the wall, and—what could have happened? Did the architect's sanity shake? Did Messrs. Carter and Paton browbeat him? Did he retire in favour of a child? Or of a play producer? Or of a housemaid soaked in romance? I do not know, but you pass out of the twentieth century into the sixteenth, and out of honesty into hokum. You stand under adzed oak beams, some of which, you perceive, are merely iron girders cased in wood; you are surrounded with old oak panelling, which is, however, neither old nor oak, since it is of composition, and was mixed but yesterday; above the panelling is a white frieze studded with Tudor roses and fleur-de-lys which would have you think they are stone when they are really plaster; from the ceiling hang iron lanterns such as Dogberry carried on the watch; under the windows the built-in benches ape the settles on which Shakespeare courted Anne Hathaway; and the doors that break the panelling are framed in four-centred Gothic arches, so that you would suppose they led to chantry chapels, if they did not bear in golden type the words, "Gentlemen" and "Ladies."

But let be: I cannot blame Messrs. Carter and Paton for striving to purvey romance as well as ale to tired people from

dusty streets. And I think that maybe the architect was a witty fellow, well content to show *both* faces of the present architectural time: its new cold realism, and its old cosy romanticism; its young, clean honesty, and its ancient coquetry with the picturesque.

Not that this plaster romance was easily seen and enjoyed on the night when Bill and Ken Every set out to find Steve. Little was visible that night except the bobbing hats and caps of the drinkers and the coagulated tobacco smoke above. Furthermore, the crowded saloon assaulted the senses in such a way that you heard, felt, and smelt, rather than saw. You heard jostling chatter, soaring laughter, mechanical music, melancholy singing, and the smothered rumour of traffic on the five roads. You felt hands touching your arm, shoulders brushing your shoulder, and hobnailed soles trampling on your toes as people pressed to the counter, or dutiful husbands strained to get glasses of stout to their young wives who were waiting with their babies outside the doors. You smelt spilled beer, running sweat, burning shag, and the ammoniac odour from the chantries.

In this joggling throng stood Steve Warren, and his pale green cap was an inch or two higher than all the other swaying hats and caps, just as his wide brown shoulders were an inch or two above the restless sea of shoulders. He was standing with Gwen, his wife, a flaxen and brisk little woman, who was quite submerged in the sea. Near by, under a window, having attained a seat at last, were his father and mother, Ernie and Maggie Warren. All the evening he had been attending to their glasses with some self-satisfaction—and with increasing abandon as he tossed more and more beer down his own throat. He had fetched beer for the old man, and forced port on his mother, regardless of her demurrings at the expense. He was happy: he liked to be the successful son who made good money and could afford to be generous; and he liked treating the old people, both because he had a real pity for the old man who had now been out of a job so long, and because he had a troubling, guilty sense that he ought to do more for them. But he loved his villa in Camberwell, his hire-purchased furniture, his classy clothes, and his Post Office savings book, and, really, what had he to spare?

This evening he had said to Gwen, "Come on, kid. Let's go and take the old people out. The old man does enjoy his pint so, and Mother's partial to her port, and they're not having much of a time these days. And, all said and done, *you* can put the stuff away too, given half a chance." And to his parents he had holla'd (filling up their narrow hall), "Come on, Ma. Get your bib and tucker on. Come on, Dad. Get a move on. All invited. Spot of gaiety to-night. It's Saturday night, isn't it? Hurry up,

because Gwen's thirsty. Jump to it, Pop." And the old people had got their hats and come quickly. Maggie Warren, that worn little lady, was always very proud of Steve, her firstborn, the child of her health, who was twice as big as she and could (and did sometimes) lift her up to the ceiling and sit her on top of a wardrobe. She would look at his fine body filling her narrow hall, or dwarfing all other men in the pub, and her heart would ache with possession.

"'S'more, Ma?" inquired Steve, his voice rasped by battling with the din. "Plenty of time f'r another. Don't look at that clock. They always keep it ten minutes fast. It's only a quarter past ten, really, and everybody knows it. Can't see why they go on shoving the clock forward, when everybody knows it's a liar and pays no attention to it. Come along; have another."

"No, dear. I don't think I ought to have another. I've enjoyed this, thank you."

"Come on, Ma! Hand it over. I'm not arguing with you, woman, I'm telling you. This is a night out, this is. It was Gwen's idea. She said, 'Let's go out and get tight'."

"Oh, I never, Steve! What next will you say?"

"Well, thank you, ducks. I don't mind if I do."

"And you, young Dad?"

"Yes, son, thank you." Ernie Warren drank the last inch in his glass, wiped his lips with the back of his hand, and pushed back his bowler hat. "Ah, that's good! Never say no to another of *them*."

"That's right, Dad. Needn't ask Gwen. Never known *her* refuse."

"Go along with you, Steve. Isn't he awful?"

"'And Steve?'" He addressed himself. "'Have another, old boy? Yes, come on, Steve! You're a sound fellow, and deserve all you can get.' 'O.K., thank you, old chap. Don't mind if I do; and allow me to observe you're a gentleman.' 'Don't mention it, cocky.'" And, holding the glasses high, he swam and sidled and breasted his way to the counter.

On his return with her glass, Maggie Warren said, "I really must be getting back after this, dearie. I got to get Fay's supper. I didn't put anything out for her. You come and swep' us off our feet."

"But she's out with her boy, isn't she? I thought she got the evening off."

"Oh, of course she is. How stupid of me! Whatever was I thinking of?"

"Ma's tight. Gwen, isn't that splendid. Ma's properly tight."

She doesn't quite know what she's talking about. Well, why not, why not, once in a way? It's not much of a world. And you're looking a bit bleary-eyed too, old girl. S'pose I'll get you home all right. Here y'are, Pop."

"Thank you, son." Ernie Warren, taking the glass in his left hand, blew his nose loudly and very thoroughly with his right, and tucked the handkerchief away in his breast pocket. "Ah, that's better. Now I can smell my beer for the first time."

"Dad, you *are* disgusting!" laughed Maggie.

"Coarse, isn't he?" said Steve. "Not at all refined. And, talking of refinement, how's our young Fay? How's she getting on with her fellow? Anything coming of it? It's been going on long enough now?"

"I think he's a nice lad," said his mother. "She might do worse than take him."

Ernie nodded profoundly. "Yes, she might do worse . . . And yet, I suppose, she might do better."

"Any other boys after her?"

"Oh yes, there's always boys hanging after Fay," answered the proud mother, "but none, as you might say, better than her Roddy—if as good, come to that. They always seem common, compared to him. He's a gentlemanly young fellow, very well brought up by his auntie and uncle—who were real gentry once, you know—and he's got a steady job, and I often think our Fay might do worse than settle down with him."

"Yes, she might do worse," nodded Ernie. "But you never know; you never know . . ."

"Well, I think——" began Steve.

"What cheer, me old packhorse!" A fat red man, with a succession of chins and a bowler hat thrust back from his perspiring brows, had forced a way towards them. "Strike me blue, if it isn't Ernie Warren! It's old Ernie. God . . . bless . . . me!"

"What *cheer*, me old chamber pot!" greeted Ernie, delighted to recognize him. "Well, I'm damned! Are you still floating? Gaw! Mother, this is old Ned Askill. We've worked together in a good many shops, haven't we, Ned?"

"Yah! And played in a good many places too, eh? But don't shout 'em out, because my old woman's here somewhere. What you having? Put a name to it, Ernie."

"No, thanks, old cock. This is my last to-night. Ta, all the same. This boy of mine's been overloading my tank, as it is. This is my son, Steve. He's doing well for himself in the world."

"Pleased to meet you, son, I'm sure. What you think of that for a father? Gahn, you great bum! But it's good, seeing your mug again, straight it is."

"This is my missus."

"Pleased to meet you, lady. Keep an eye on him, I should. I could tell you some things about him, but I won't. What you doing now, Ernie? You're a gentleman of leisure, aren't you, same as me? They put me off about three months ago."

"Haven't seen a job for a year, I haven't; and I don't mind telling you, Ned, old boy, it's getting me down a bit." Ernie, though sober enough, had melted into the sentimental and sententious mood, some of which seemed to be liquefying in his eyes. "Forty years I've worked for this blasted country, and four years I fought for it; and now it's got no more use for me than for some old broken bottle. They just tell me to clear out and rot. The dustbin for me. The dustbin when I'm still in the pink and got as much work in me as ever I had. You got children, they say; let *them* keep you; we don't want you. Means Test, Gaw! It's just not good enough, I say. It's a revolution we want, that's what I say."

"*Sh*, Dad!" chided his wife, in the way wives do, when their husbands are heating up.

"Well, never mind, old Ernie, cheer up. 'What's the use of worrying?' And there's going to be a war soon, thank the Lord. They're coming for us again, old boy."

"You won't catch me lifting a hand to fight for this country a second time——"

"Nah! That's not the idea. We'll make munitions and money, me and you. They'll send for us fast enough. So roll on, War, I say. Here's to it."

The doors swung open as people passed out. Had the Warrens turned their eyes towards the opening doors, one or other of them might have seen the pale face of Bill Every peeping in, and peering round the company. Bill Every, sucking a cigarette, and Ken Every, his brother, lounging at his side. But they did not; they continued in political argument, till such time as the mechanical piano began to jangle out, "There's something about a soldier . . ." and the shifting company, so rhythmic the tune, began to shout the chorus. High voices of women trembled above the thick, massed voices of the men.

"There's *something* about a soldier,
Something about a soldier,
Something about a soldier,
That is fine. fine, fine . . ."

"There you are! What did I say?" demanded Ned. "Only I'm making munitions."

"He *may* be a great big general,
He *may* be a sergeant-major . . ."

Irresistible beat! Two fat old dames who had drunk well, picked up their worn, black skirts and began to jig it and foot it in front of each other, while the men formed a ring around them, and beat time with hands and feet. Mastered by the beat, the old women danced towards each other and half curtsied; they danced back; they side-stepped this way and that way, pointing their toes; they tripped forward again and curtsied, while their black hats, insecurely fixed by single pins, toppled over their grey hair, and the sweat beaded on their brows, and the watching people cheered and laughed, and clapped the rhythm, and bellowed the refrain:

"He *may* be a great big general,
He *may* be a sergeant-major
He *may* be a simple private
Of the line, line, line . . ."

"Time, gentlemen, please," called the barman.

"Time, gents, please," echoed the potman, moving from table to table, and gathering up the glasses.

But no heed gave the two dancing ladies, nor the ring of people around them. The song went on, and the dance. Cake walk and curtsy, *chassé* to right, *chassé* to left; coy lift of petticoats and fanwise swinging of them; while the men shouted, "Oh, Granny, you saucy girl!" and "Now, Liz, whatever next? Oh, I *say*!" They linked arms, the two old dancers; they flung round each other with their scored and knuckly hands lifted high as in a Highland reel, while the men let loose Highland shrieks and cat-called and yodelled, and did a few pirouettes of their own.

Ernie and Maggie, Steve and Gwen, Ned and his lady, were all standing in the ring now to see the fun; and Ernie was smiling, and Ned was footing it with one hand on his hip and the other upraised, and Maggie was shaking her head disapprovingly, and muttering that it was not nice: it was common.

Common it may have been, and so much the better. But that it was unlovely we will not allow. Not a bit of it: we clap with the rest, and accompany them with a song. For these jaded old matrons were dancing the best ballet of all: the ballet of the lovely courage of all depressed and disinherited people. They were dancing the divine laughter and lofty defiance in Man, and

they were dancing them on the grave of their dreams. They were dancing forgiveness of the past, and a challenge to the future—for who knew what might be coming? They were dancing a salute to Life, despite its kicks and slaps, and a tribute to the Present Moment, and goodwill to all. And their hats slopped over their ears, and their thin hair fell in wisps, and the people, caught up by their inspiration, jigged and vibrated with them, swaying their shoulders, clapping their hands, jerking up their thumbs, while they accompanied them with a new song—started Heaven knows how, for the piano had exhausted its pennyworth—but perhaps all for the moment were geniuses, including the piano; and piano and people had been inspired to find exactly the right song, and to rejoice in its sorrowful aptness:

“What does he know, what does he care?
Nothing for you and me.
Old Father Thames keeps rolling along,
Down to the mighty sea.”

One man had jumped on to a bench, and was conducting. Others, turning their backs to the ballet, stood in a ring around him, bellowing. Others, hands in pockets, hats pushed back, stood smiling, now at the male voice choir, now at the old ladies' *pas de deux*.

“Time ladies, if you please. Time, gents, please.”

And this time most of the lights went out. The lights went out to tell them that barman and potman meant what they said. The dancing ladies desisted and, turning aside, half delighted, half ashamed, replaced their hats and their hair. Time. Another night of jollity and good-fellowship over. Ah, well. “Good night, Mr. Grayson. Good night, Tom. So long, Nance. Good night, all.”

“Good night, old Ernie,” said Ned, as they moved to the doors. “I’d come part of the way with you, only I got to go to church in the morning.”

“You and your church!” derided his wife.

Ernie paused to discuss the church with him. “I’m done with churches, old boy, and I’ll tell you for why. I always used to stand up for ’em, I always used to stand up for God and Jesus Christ, but what I say now is——”

“That’ll do, Ernie,” Maggie touched his arm, to guide him on. “Never mind that now. Mr. and Mrs. Askill want to get home.”

“O.K., Ma. Push on, Ned. Good-bye. I’ll see you in church at your funeral—and may it be soon. I’ll go to church for *that*, like a shot. But not for nothing else. Not on your life.”

“That’s right, Ernie. Don’t you. Don’t you do nothing you

don't want to—never. Well"—they were now on the lamp-lit pavement—"good night, old son of a gun. Keep smiling. What I always say is, keep your backside warm, and your eggs won't hatch out too bad. Guess we haven't had too bad a time in the past, and who knows what's coming? Let it come, any old how. Good night, ladies. Good night, young fellow-me-lad—Steve, or what's-your-name. So long, old Ernie boy."

§

"Come on, Gwen," commanded Steve. "'And come on, Steve, old darling.' We'll see 'em as far as their corner, and then get on a bus at Vauxhall Broadway. After all, Ma's tight. I wouldn't say but what Dad was a bit oiled up too."

"You do talk!" protested his mother, but laughing, because she loved him.

And all four of them walked slowly along Upper Kennington Lane, Steve holding his mother's arm and humming to himself the song he had last heard, "What does he know, what does he care? Nothing for you and me . . ." and Ernie walking and talking with Gwen, who looked a small, flaxen child beside him. None of them perceived that, twenty paces behind, two slight figures were following them.

Bill and Ken had had no difficulty in tracing Steve. Outside his villa in Camberwell they had learned from a neighbour that "Mr. and Mrs. Warren's gone to see his father and mother"; and on the steps of the house in Tyers Street they had heard from the woman who lived on the upper floor. "They've all gawn awf to the Packhorse. I heard him shoutin' at 'em to come"; and through the swinging doors of the Packhorse they had easily distinguished the head of Steve moving an inch or two above the others. And they had waited. They had waited for over an hour, but that is no great time for those who are accustomed to loafing at street corners with cigarettes between their lips.

Besides, Bill was nervous. He knew that Steve Warren was much bigger and stronger than he, and he knew that he'd have to carry out his bragging threats since Ken would be present at his side. But it would be better to wait till the streets were dark, and on these accursed July nights they were not dark till after ten. He lit fag after fag with an unsteady hand. His fingers went often to a waistcoat pocket, as if there were something there that strengthened him. And ever and again he recalled Steve's insolent threat of a "hiding," because the memory always acted as a splash

of oil on his smouldering fury. And he reminded himself that Ken, though he hadn't said so openly, and mustn't be asked to, was there to help him. He knew that between them, unspoken, unrecognized, an invisible wraith, but a real and encouraging presence, stood the agreement that they were going to support each other and double-bank Mr. Steve Warren.

"I wish his bleedin' old father and mother wasn't there, Ken."

"Yepp."

"Not that I'm afraid of his old man, who's as fat as a house, but this is a matter between him and me, like."

"Yepp."

"And I don't want the old woman screaming the street down. I could wish his missus wasn't there either, but I'm going to have it out with him. I'm going to have it out with him to-night."

"Yepp. But, whatever you do, you'd better get 'im before he goes and gets on a bus."

"Yes, that's right. . . . Yes, I s'pose so. But I can't very well tackle him in the bleedin' main road, can I?"

"We'll see where he goes."

"That's right."

It was worrying: the moment was near. The dark was falling about them, and the traffic was dwindling, and the people were fewer in the streets. His hands, and his heart, were unsteady. His fingers felt in his waistcoat pocket, as he gazed at the street-lamps down the road.

And then it was half-past ten, and the Packhorse was emptying its customers on to the pavement and breathing out its hot, smoky air. Bill moved a few paces along the kerb, but watched from the side of his eye, while his fingers still fiddled in the waistcoat pocket. Ken moved with him. They saw the Warrens come out with the Askills, and heard the laughing farewell. They saw Steve and his wife turn with his parents and walk slowly along Upper Kennington Lane.

They followed, Ken working a cigarette from side to side of his mouth, and Bill pushing forward his chin, to gainsay the protesting of his heart. He must do it soon now; very soon. The Lane, at its other end by Vauxhall Broadway, would be lamplit and populous; here, for a long stretch, it was shadowy and quiet. They had left the shuttered shops behind them, and were passing the long terraces of high, grey houses. These terraces, though broken up now into apartments for the poor, stood well back from the road, withdrawn into themselves behind gardens and railings; and if some of their windows were patches of light high up in the darkness, the blinds of all were drawn. Trams grated along the

roadway, but only after long intervals; and, anyhow, they were full of light, while the road outside them was dark.

Of a sudden Steve stepped into the entrance of St. Oswald's Place to light his pipe. There was shelter here, because it was a narrow entrance, set between a chapel and a parsonage garden, and overhung by the branches of plane trees.

"How's that for a chah'nst?" whispered Ken.

"Eh? What . . . what say . . .?"

"There's your chah'nst, isn't it?"

Bill could not disappoint him. He slouched up to Steve.

"Ere!" he said, chin thrust out. "I want to speak to you."

"What the hell——" began Steve; and he recognized him, and swung his glance to Ken and back to Bill. "Oh, it's you, is it?"

"Yes, it's me all right. I bin thinking of what you said last night, and I'm not takin' it, see."

"Well, I can't help that. I said it, and I meant it. By Christ, I did! Been following me, have you? Christ, what a waste of time! Come on, Ma. Come on, Gwen. Guess we'll leave you at the next corner, and hop on to our bus."

"Oh no you don't! You don't get away like that. You don't get off till you've taken back what you said last night, see. It was a liberty."

"Oh, hop it. As sure as you take a hand to our Vi, I'll take a hand to you; and that's flat. Come on, folks."

Bill got himself in front of him, and squared up with clenched fists. "Oh no. I don't take that."

"Get out of my way, you little misery. What do you want? A sock on the jaw? You can have it if you like."

"Oh, come on, Steve," pleaded Gwen. "He's been drinking."

"Let 'im have it, Bill," muttered Ken. "He's arst for it."

"Here, what's this? What's all this, Bill?" demanded Ernie. "What are you doing here?"

"This. This is what I'm doin'." And, lowering his head bullwise, he drove his fist into Steve's face. Maggie and Gwen screamed.

"God's Christ!" Steve recovered from the blow, and with his teeth on his lip he leapt forward and aimed a tremendous blow at Bill's eyes. Bill dodged from it, but it crashed on his shoulder and sent him staggering. Steve was about to follow it up with further punishment, when Ken shot a fist into his ear, and danced back.

"Oh, oh, oh! Oh dear!" cried Maggie Warren, her hand pressed against her cheek.

"Oh, you're both in it, are you? All right, I don't mind. I'll easily take on two little worms like you."

"Oh, come away, come away, Steve," Gwen begged.

"Not I! I'll give him what he's been asking for for a long time. Get out of the way, Dad. Leave him to me."

"Oh, Steve, don't. Oh, we shall have the police coming. Oh, stop him, Dad."

"You go to hell." This was to Ken, as Steve swung his left arm to sweep him from his path, and strode forward to deal with Bill. He drove Bill against the railings of the parsonage garden, and struck him between the eyes. Bill, blinking and grimacing with pain, and alight with fury, dodged down from the next blow, fumbled in his pocket, leapt on to Steve, and gashed his cheek from ear to chin with the blade of a safety razor. And at the same time Ken, coming from behind, caught Steve by the shoulder and, pushing his knee into the small of his back, pulled him to the ground.

A loud scream came from Maggie. "God, he's murdered him, murdered him! Oh, oh, oh!"

"It's all right, Ma," groaned Steve. "It's . . . it's not much . . . oh, hell, oh God . . . oh, Dad. . . ."

"You brute! You brute!" shrieked Gwen, and rushed at Bill. "You'll go to prison for this. You'll go for years."

But Bill was running away. "Come on, Ken. That's learned him. Now p'raps he'll mind his own business. Come on, before the cops come."

Ken, perceiving that he might be left on the field alone, ran too. The two slight figures dashed across the road, like dogs at play in the night, and disappeared in the darkness of Henry Street.

"Oh my boy, my boy," moaned Maggie, leaning over Steve. "Give me a handkerchief, someone. He's bleeding terribly. Oh, the brute, the brute! Oh, Dad, what are we to do?"

"You'll have to get him to hospital, guv'nor," said a man's voice; and for the first time they became aware that people had come up in the dark, and that others were running towards them along the pavement, or across the road. "That's a hospital business, that is. Of all the dirty rotters! I saw him do it. If you want a witness, I saw it all. But he'll have to have that sewn up."

"We must get him home," said Maggie. "Help me with him, Dad."

"It's all right, Ma. I can walk all right."

They got him to his feet, their friendly adviser fussing around, and peering at the wound.

"Crikey! Proper gash, isn't it? You must get a doctor to that. Far, is it? No. O.K., I know where there's a doctor. What's your number? O.K. I'll get him to you. You get him home, see, and I'll send the doctor along in a twink."

And, greatly pleased with this office, he broke into a run. He ran in the direction of Kennington Cross and, a hundred paces on, nearly collided with a policeman ruminating at the corner of Esher

Street. His sense of civic duty being as great as his relish for drama (if indeed it was not the same thing), he hastened to apprise the policeman of a crime committed, and to direct him where he was wanted. And the policeman, no less pleased, for he had been yawning on his beat, no less officious, no less ready to identify delight in drama with devotion to duty, set off briskly for Tyers Street.

XIII

WHEN Fay, late home that night, heard of the assault on Steve, and how they were arresting Bill Every, her pity for Steve was crowded into a corner by her pity for herself. Oh, the disgrace of it! The public shame! Roddy would now hear the worst about Vi and Bill, and he would despise her family and her. His love would sicken under the shock, and he would turn from her. And she, at twenty, would be left with no one at all. Bill's blade had slashed at her chances, as well as at Steve's cheek. She would have to look out for another boy, and she would never find another of as good class as Roddy. Not now. Not after this. Oh, what a vain little idiot she had been to imagine she was worth someone better than Roddy—she with her father out of work, and her brother-in-law a gaol-bird. She would lose him now, and it would serve her right. She cried on her pillow for some of that night.

But Fay was fearing a thing that wasn't there. No one was happier than Roddy when he heard of the disaster. Of course he was sorry for Steve, but this compassion (not unpleasant in itself) was a small thing compared with his excitement in the drama and his delight in the opportunities it afforded him of playing the knight-errant and earning praise. There would be a trial at the Old Bailey. This excited him more than he cared to tell. And in the meantime he could be the Friend of the Family running from home to home, the Man of Affairs bustling about on important tasks, and the Strong Protecting Male, supporting the weak women. In these weeks he could certainly be Someone. It was like a draught of good wine to say grandly to Fay, "All that I can do I will. Mind you call on me for anything. Any hour of the day, see. I'm with you in this through thick and thin." And not the least of his pleasures—he tried to repress it, but could not—was the thought that the disgrace of it had diminished Fay and enlarged him, and so increased the chances of her surrender.

Steve was in hospital, Bill in Brixton Prison—Brixton Prison, of all places, just across the road! See what a field of good works and picturesque kindnesses lay open before Roddy. He went to Gwen Warren's home in Camberwell and told her to command him. He ran errands for her. He escorted her to the hospital, bearing his flowers. He went to Vi's home in Mordern Street to offer his help, and, having learned her condition, took her comforts and

flowers—and this, strange to say, gave him the greatest pleasure of all. He studied to be a Tower of Strength to old Mr. and Mrs. Warren in Tyers Street, and he was secretly pleased to hear from Fay that they were contrasting him most favourably with Gracie's husband, young Wally Bates. Driven by the old strong interest, he suggested to them that he should accompany Vi on her visits to Brixton Prison; and when they agreed, and Vi agreed, a trembling excitement filled him. Now at last he could go along that forbidden avenue, and pass through the heavy gates. All too acclaimed his suggestion that he should escort Vi to the Old Bailey on the day of the trial, and he went with no little self-importance to his manager to ask a free day. "My young lady's brother was attacked in the street by his brother-in-law, who's a real wrong 'un—I dare say you read something about it at the time—and I'm doing all I can to help. They've asked me to look after the man's wife on the day of the trial. I've been helping her quite a lot while he's been in prison. She's come to rely on me, somehow. Do you think I might have the day off?" And the manager, moved by a like joy in drama, and a like joy in being helpful, answered, "Of course, my boy. I'll manage that for you all right. I'll certainly manage it. It must be very worrying for you all."

"It is," said Roddy, who had seldom been happier. "But I'm standing in with them, you bet."

"That's right. We all have to help at such times. Yes, I'll see to that for you, my boy. Don't you worry."

So praise for Roddy, like incense smoke, was rising from little altars in Camberwell, in Vauxhall, in the Lower Marsh, and, not least, in a cell of Brixton Prison. "I'm sure he's been Kindness Itself," was the refrain of all. "He couldn'ta done more, not if he'd been a real brother. He *is* a nice young fellow."

§

On the morning of the trial, dressed in his best, and wrapped in pride to think that he would pass as a privileged person into the halls of the Old Bailey, he arrived at the house in Mordern Street. In a little while, with Mordern Street watching, he brought forth the prisoner's wife, who was also arrayed as if for a triumph. No one could have guided her, and guarded her, more tenderly. He put her into a taxi, and paid for it himself, and his pleasure in the shattering expenditure was enough (though only just) to defeat the pain. When she began to weep in the taxi, he patted her hand. His fingers on her arm, he guided her up the steps of the Old Bailey; and when she burst into tears at the sight of its

majestic staircase and long, pillared corridors, he slid an arm about her waist, and helped her onward. He did not let her see that the high roof and marble walls, the easy-strolling policemen and hurrying barristers in wigs and gowns, and the far-off imperious voices, were shaking him too, for he wanted to walk by her side as a strong man of affairs, whom no portentous palace could make afraid. But, in truth, the knowledge that he was overawed and shaken by these tremendous aisles, had bruised and saddened him. What was the sense of hoping to do great things in the world if he was always dazed like this by the halls of Greatness?

Not knowing what to do, and not liking, for fear of a rebuff, to approach the doors of Court II, where Bill's case would be heard, he sat with Vi till her name was called just before noon. "Violet Warren. Violet Warren" the name echoed in the corridor. "Come along," he said; and, his arm at her waist because she was trembling, he guided her to the doors of the court room; where he learned that all his fear had been unnecessary, for the hatless policeman just pushed back the door and passed him through without a word.

Inside, a gowned usher beckoned to Vi, and she followed him; and Roddy fell into a seat near the door.

From here he could see almost everything, and he stared with a gaping interest. Never had the old Ring by Blackfriars Bridge gripped him with the power of this small court room, though its interest had been of the same kind—pungent, and not unsalted with shame. Centre and focus of it all, like a wrestler in the floodlit ring, sat Bill Every in a wood-and-glass-panelled dock as big as a bear's cage. A prison officer sat at his elbow, like the bear's keeper. Facing him across the well of the court, and up-lifted on a walled-in stage, the Recorder of London, a bright blob of colour in his red and black robes, sat at his table with a posy of flowers before him. A broad and furry alderman of the City filled the throne at his side. All the other thrones on that dais were empty, for this little broil at a street corner, south of the river, was of no interest to the fashion and power of the City. Above the judge and the alderman the Royal Arms looked down upon the prisoner with offended dignity. Clerk of the Court, usher, barristers, solicitors, and police, sat or floated about the well of court; and behind them, in a long pen, lolled the jury. High above the jury box, in a small public gallery, a peculiarly repellent medley of louts, who seemed to be loafers blown up from the street, stared at the scene, those in the front row resting their elbows on the ledge and letting their lips droop. More often than not their dull, fishy eyes considered the prisoner. They were exactly like the clod-polls who stared from the cheapest gallery at the Ring at a wrestler whose pain was to come.

Roddy was shocked by something slackly evil in their eyes, but he could not condemn them, since he knew that a strong lift of the same gloating interest was in him too.

The trial was nearing its close. It had not taken long to hear the evidence of Mr. and Mrs. Warren, of Gwen and Steve, and of the Medical Officer at the hospital and of the Detective Sergeant who had arrested Bill; or the rebutting evidence of the prisoner and his brother. A frail and unconvincing tale, it seemed, was all that the defending counsel had been able to put up, with the help of these two: a contention that Steve had been drinking all night, and had struck first, and that Bill, somewhat incensed, as he admitted, had hit back hard, forgetting in the warmth of the moment that his hand held a small pocket knife with which he had been scraping his nails. Vi was only called to swear that her husband had never once shaved with a safety razor in all the time she had known him, and that no razor blades, to her knowledge, had ever been seen in the house.

Everyone in the court was plainly pitying her, as she stood in the box, twisting up her handkerchief, and dabbing it on her eyes, and trying to speak louder when judge or counsel said gently, "Speak up, Mrs. Warren. Please speak up."

"That'll do, Mrs. Warren. Thank you."

Her absurd little statements heard, she stepped down and walked towards the seats at the back, but dissolved in tears before she was half-way there. The court rustled with sympathy and appreciation. Roddy stood up that she might take his seat, and remained standing at her side, sometimes patting her on the shoulder as she sobbed.

Now the defending counsel rose to make his final speech, but before he could begin, the Recorder, a certain ennui worrying his fine, sharp features, glanced at the clock and asked him, "Shall you be long, Mr. Hughes?"

Mr. Hughes bowed. "Not unduly, I hope, my lord."

The Recorder looked over his spectacles at the prosecuting counsel. "And you, Mr. Braybon?"

"Ten minutes, my lord," affirmed Mr. Braybon, very confidently, half rising, so that his fat round body was neither standing nor sitting. "Ten minutes is the utmost I shall require." And he fell back into his seat, as if the battle was as good as won.

Mr. Hughes, still standing, bowed to him satirically.

"Good," said the Recorder. "Then I shall not be long either, and we can finish before lunch." And languidly he scanned the list of cases on his desk. There were several other cases to be digested to-day, and the sooner this unimportant and unsavoury mess was done with, the better. "Now, Mr. Hughes . . . ?"

"Well, gentlemen of the jury . . ."

Mr. Hughes, a long, lean, elegant gentleman, was no dock-briefed

counsel, picked out by a destitute prisoner from the barristers present, but a properly instructed "mouthpiece," fee'd by a group of Bill's pals, of whom he had many. And he certainly did his best with his anæmic and weak-kneed brief. He rode his donkey like a charger. His gown falling over one shoulder, and his hands grasping his hips, as if he cantered at ease over a fine field of righteousness, he suggested in the most persuasive voice that all the Warrens had been drunk; that the only people who had not been drunk were his client and his brother; that the Warrens, on their own evidence, had been in the public house two hours and more, and were therefore in no condition to see clearly what had happened; that, in fact, his client and his brother were the only people in a condition to see clearly what had happened; that the prisoner's story hung perfectly together from beginning to end, and none of the evidence called by his learned friend had shaken it anywhere; that the whole thing was just a family vendetta such as was not uncommon in those Surrey Side streets; that you couldn't expect very civilized behaviour from people who used terms like "double-bank"; that Steve was obviously a provocative and violent person who went about looking for trouble; that he was a powerful man, twice the size of the little prisoner, who would have been a fool to attack him first, and must, to be sure, have been quite unbearably provoked to attack him at all; that, in short, gentlemen, the whole thing was nothing more than a drunken brawl—such a brawl as, according to the evidence of the detective sergeant, occurred not infrequently on a Saturday night in those parts after the pubs—the—er—public-houses had closed; and that they would be wise, in his submission, not to treat it too seriously. In his submission, they could not, dare not, *must* not, bring in a verdict of "guilty of unlawfully wounding"; still less, one of "guilty of wounding with intent to cause grievous bodily harm"; but only, as men of the world, a verdict of "not guilty."

He sat down; and the prosecuting counsel stood up and made mincemeat of all this, using as his chopper the evidence of the doctor, which, in point of fact, was an instrument as sharp for its purpose as ever was Bill Every's blade. His pencil now pointing at the jury, now poking the tails of his wig from between his collar and his plump red neck, he submitted that the nature of Steve's wound was conclusive; that, with all respect to his learned friend, whom, if he might say so, the prisoner was fortunate to have as his advocate, it was nothing but a dodging of the issue, a drawing of a red herring across the track, a deliberate and, he would add, a disingenuous attempt to throw dust in the eyes of intelligent men, to suggest that the eminently respectable Mr. Warren, the eminently respectable Mrs. Warren, and the eminently respectable Steve and Gwen Warren, had been, to put it crudely, blind drunk; that he

himself, and he would frankly confess it, had sometimes sat over his wine at a hotel for two hours and more, and, on rising from the table and passing out into the street, had been quite able to distinguish the commissionaire from the cab-horse ; that he would do his learned friend the justice to believe that he too, after two brief hours of good-fellowship with his friends, would still be in a condition to distinguish a dastardly, slashing attack from a blow in self-defence ; and that they, gentlemen of the jury, would know, as men of the world, how to treat such unjustifiable insinuations, and would not allow them to blind them to the damning nature of the evidence.

To all this the defending counsel, sitting back in his seat, listened with intent eyes, as though weighing its effect ; and when in his turn the Recorder began his summing up, he lifted his chin and listened to him with an equal intensity—but only for two minutes. Two minutes of the judge's address, and the defending counsel, it appeared, was in possession of knowledge : he rose, he bowed to the judge ; he tip-toed along the alleys to Vi's seat and touched her on the shoulder and beckoned to her to come outside. And she, her eyes terrified, followed him.

Roddy slipped into her seat. The judge was continuing his unimpassioned exegesis, sometimes lifting his notes to study them through his spectacles, sometimes laying them down and his spectacles too. He was indicating effectively enough, though with remarkable convolutions, and a most skilful clothing and wrapping-up of his remarks with every " But " and " If " and " On the other hand " out of the legal wardrobe, that the duty of the jury, as men of the world, was to find the prisoner guilty of the major offence.

When the judge had said his last word, and removed his spectacles for the last time, and folded up his papers, the jury stumbled from their box and disappeared through the panelling, as might a procession of ghosts ; and the room immediately became a hive of humming talk and bustling movement. Ten minutes, and still they did not return. Nor did Vi. Nor did the defending counsel.

After twelve minutes they filed back through their panel in the wall ; and the judge suddenly reappeared in his place like an Arabian jinee materializing at a wish ; and the court, as if suddenly tranced, went silent. Mute, motionless, and staring, it awaited the verdict.

Guilty. Guilty of wounding with intent to cause grievous bodily harm.

Instantly the detective sergeant, a thick-set and ruddy young man, stepped into the box to read the record of Bill's previous convictions. And as he was rehearsing them, the defending counsel tip-toed back to his seat.

The sergeant, after being thanked and dismissed by the judge, bowed and stepped down; and then came the one high, human moment in a petty and humdrum trial.

"My lord." The defending counsel had risen in his place. "With your lordship's permission, and before you pronounce sentence, the prisoner's wife would like to say a word."

"Certainly, Mr. Hughes. By all means." The judge spoke sympathetically. He might be anxious to be done with this insignificant case, but he remembered the young wife with pity. "Let her say what she likes." And he glanced again at the clock, and at his wrist watch. A quarter past one. Still, let mercy have precedence over weariness and hunger.

A policeman went out to call Violet Warren; and Roddy, conceiving of her as his charge, and not averse from letting the people know it, hurried out to help her; and it was he who brought her through the door, a weeping, round-faced child, and passed her, with a hand at her waist, to the usher.

And Vi stood again in the witness box, twisting her damp handkerchief, and gazing up at the judge.

"I understand there is something you wish to say." Very gently, very courteously, the judge was speaking to her. "Well, don't be afraid. Say anything you like. I am ready to hear anything and all you feel you would like to say."

Vi dashed her handkerchief across her eyes, and lowered it to the ledge of the box. "I wanted to ask your lordship if you'd give him a chah'nst. . . . If he done it, your lordship, he musta lost his head, like, and not known what he was doing. It's not like him: it isn't, really. He loses his temper sometimes, same as we all do, but he wouldn't deliberately—not in his senses he wouldn't—go and do a thing like that. I mean, I *know* him, sir. . . . If you could give him a chah'nst. . . ."

The judge was staring at her and tapping his pencil on his papers, first its top and then its point. "He's been a good husband to you, has he?"

"Always, sir, always. . . . We've had a few quarrels, of course, but not more than is natural . . . and he's worked hard for me and the children—as hard as any man could—and with everything against him, sir, if I may say so."

"Yes. Well?"

"And I promise, if you would give him a chah'nst, I'll help him to keep straight. I believe I can keep him from doing anything like this again, sir, I do, really."

"Yes. Well, is there anything else you'd like to say?"

"I don't know what to say, sir. . . . I—I've never bin in a court before. . . . He's a good man, really—only a bit hot-headed, like, sometimes. But he does *try*. I know *that*: he does *try*."

"Well, thank you, Mrs. Warren. You've said all you could, I'm sure. And you can be certain I shall give full weight to it. Thank you."

"Thank you, sir."

And, overcome by what she had done, Vi hurried from the court room, with her fist crushing her handkerchief, and Roddy's arm about her waist.

The Clerk challenged the prisoner. Had he anything to say?

"No, sir."

So the judge spoke. "William Every, you have been properly convicted, after a most fair trial, of one of the gravest offences known to our law. The law of our country visits with the sternest punishment the use of weapons. Have no doubt about that. I want you to realize that for this savage and inhuman assault I could have sent you, had I thought fit, to penal servitude for life. But I have taken into consideration the fact that your previous offences have not been of such a serious nature as this one, and I have listened to your wife's appeal for you. All things considered, I am prepared to believe her when she says there is good in you; but you are a violent young man, and you must learn not to be, because we are not going to have it. *We are not going to have it!*" He paused, and twirled his pencil. "It may be that my sentence is too lenient, but if so, you can thank your wife for it, because I have chosen to believe her; and I hope you will always remember this, when you go back to her. You will go to prison for fifteen months."

XIV

FAY in her silences had a sum to do now. Vi's appeal had helped her husband; but it turned and bit at Fay. All the papers in South London seized upon it as a "human story." The *Southwark News*, the *South London Chronicle*, the *Brixton Free Press*, they reported the incident under a two-column headline and billed it on their placards. "Wife Pleads for Husband"; "A Family Quarrel. Savage Assault in Vauxhall Street"; "'Drunken Brawl,' Says Counsel."

Warren, Warren, Warren; drunk, drunk, drunk: the name and the sickening word leapt from the columns at Fay as she studied them on the Friday morning. Ernest Warren, of 161 Tyers Street, an unemployed labourer; Steve Warren, of Upper Grove, Camberwell; Violet Every, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Warren; William Every, a hawker with two previous convictions; Mordern Street, and the detective sergeant's description of it: "A very low-class neighbourhood, my lord, where some of the people live in dreadful conditions, and quite a few of them are well known to us as habitual criminals. I found the prisoner's home in a dilapidated and verminous state."

Oh, how was she to face the girls at the cinema? She wished they were all dead. That wretched Elsie Cummings who was always quarrelling with her—how she would sneer! That impertinent young usher, Jim Donohew, whom she had snubbed the other day! The doorman! The manager! Oh, she never wanted to see the place again.

But she would have to appear there this afternoon. She would have to go through with it. Oh well, if she must, she would. "Come on, my young woman," she commanded herself, tossing her head, "pull yourself together, and go through with it. Come on, Fay. It's time now, time. Jump to it, girl."

And briskly, through the un pitying sunlight, she walked to the huge, cold palace in the Walworth Road. Defiantly she pushed open the swing doors. Head high, she walked towards the staff room. But outside its door she heard her name being bandied about by the chattering girls; and the determination and defiance dropped out of her heart, and she ran and hid in the lavatory, bolting the door. Not till she knew the staff room was empty did she slip out and run to her locker and put on her uniform—a

uniform which had no pleasure for her any more. It was a brown uniform of military cut, with yellow collar, cuffs, and plastron; and once the very feel of it about her had given her self-assurance and dignity and poise, but now she was limp in it, like a sawdust doll. Running to the Lounge, where the manager was already inspecting the staff parade, she placed herself at the end of the line of girls. Girls turned to look at her, but she stared straight in front of her, and drove back her tears.

The parade dismissed, she turned and ran to her place of duty in the circle before any girl could speak to her. There was comfort in the twilight of the circle; but there would be more comfort in the darkness when the house lights went out. Oh, go out, go out! Go out, and surround me with darkness. Oh, will you never go out? The non-sink music blared and brayed; a few people trickled down the gangway to their seats—laughing people who were happy; and at length—ah, thank God—the lights dimmed and died, and she was where she wanted to be. She was annihilated by the darkness. She was no more than a beam of white light, flashing up and down the gangway.

And in that compassionate darkness she did her sum. All that afternoon and evening the darkness enclosed roars of multitudinous laughter, or isolated giggles and gasps and sighs; but it enclosed also a girl who sometimes wiped her eyes and her nose, because she was slowly, deliberately, paring down her dreams.

"It's no good," she thought, snatching the handkerchief away; "I must face up to it that my dad is an unemployed labourer, and my brother-in-law is in prison, and I'm nobody—just nobody. No gentleman is ever going to marry *me*. *Me!* I should think not. I'm just a fanciful little idiot, when I dream of finding someone better than Roddy. I don't know what I imagine I am, really. I don't know how ever I got such ideas. What on earth have I got to offer anyone except a pretty face; and that won't last much longer. No, I guess I shall be lucky if Roddy still wants me. . . . And he's been so *good*. I got to remember that." She felt glad of all excuses that would enable her to rest with Roddy. "And I'm really frightfully fond of him. I know *that*. I know I should just hate to hurt him. He's not exactly all that I wanted, but we've worked ourselves into one another, somehow. I *ought* to accept him, after all the encouragement I given him. I did lead him on; you can't deny that."

And supposing, after all, he tired from her hesitations and turned from her? Supposing, after all, she had to marry some raw youth, who had none of Roddy's gentlemanlike ways? A home like her

mother's. Or Vi's. Daily toil, draining all beauty out of her. Tuberculosis. Ted wasting and burning away on his bed. Or supposing no one married her at all, and she stayed at home in Tyers Street? Instantly she saw the Means Test, and rebelled passionately against a world that wanted to take all things from her.

Nine hours of darkness. Nine hours in which to ponder and weigh and calculate, even when she was busy directing meaningless, dim people to their seats. Oh, to be done with this cinema where every one knew. To be miles away from Tyers Street, in some district where the name of Every was unknown. To be in a little home of one's own, keeping it nice. To laugh and joke and be at peace, because a dilemma was snapped and broken, and a debate closed. To fondle and make much of Roddy, as a wife should. To be lying beneath his kisses at night. As she imagined these things, flashes of happiness began to illumine her pain.

By eleven o'clock, when the lights went up, her sum was done. She had written off her capital. She had accepted her smallness and commonness; and the acceptance, strange to say, had come like a healer, bringing gifts of serenity and hope and laughter and strength.

§

And in the next days when she walked out with Roddy, they might talk of many matters, but she, whether laughing or arguing or listening, was really waiting for his question. She even became anxious, terrified, as the days passed by, and he said nothing. And one night, despair swelling, she tossed an opportunity to him.

It was midnight, and they were saying good-bye in Spring Gardens Walk near her home. Spring Gardens Walk is as pretty a name as you will find in Vauxhall; and it is an accurate name because it is the very path which the revellers took when they left their watermen's skiffs at Vauxhall Stairs and hastened to the gates of the Gardens; but the place is pretty no longer. It is now a tunnelled alley under the viaduct, and at one end of the tunnel is the open light of the Albert Embankment, and at the other the more shadowed light of Goding Street. Nearly a hundred yards long, it is so dark that the two lamps which must burn in it on the sunniest days look like two stars caught and imprisoned in a vault of the Bastille. Nowadays people hasten along it to be

rid of the low-vaulted roof and its gloom ; and only lovers tarry there. For many months Roddy and Fay had used its privacy for their farewell embrace, before she went from him with a wave of her hand, and ran up Gye Street—ran, that is to say, through the Main Gate and up the Grand Walk.

This night, as they kissed, a train thundered and vibrated above them ; and Fay, startled and buffeted by the noise, half broke the embrace and buried her ear in his coat ; and from this safe position, she looked up at him and smiled and pretended to frown. And as the quivering roar tapered into the distance, she suddenly turned her face away, and flung out an arm, and let it fall to her side. A moment of sadness, and she replaced the arm as suddenly about his neck, and, smiling and frowning into his face, exclaimed, " Oh, I don't want to go back home at all ! I don't, I don't, I don't ! I hate all this part so. I always have hated it, and now I hate it worse than ever. It's so gloomy—oh, I dunno. I wish I never had to go back to it ever again."

" Well, don't," he laughed, hardly serious just then. " Marry me, and we'll live somewhere nice. Somewhere where there are trees. Oh, Fay"—his jest had stirred his blood, and he was serious now—" why don't you marry me ? I'd take you miles away, if you liked." Magnificent to feel protective and paternal. " To the other end of South London, if you liked. I shouldn't mind how far I had to go to my work, so long as you were happy, and I'd got you there. Oh, just think of it ! And I'm sure we could manage all right. You could get a job in the daytime, easy as eggs ; and we wouldn't have any kids at first. Oh, Fay, why don't you ? "

Lifting her face towards his, so that her eyes shone in the lamp-light, she leaned her body against him.

" Fay ! Do you mean you will ? "

She smiled ; and her head just nodded.

" Fay, you don't mean it ! You can't ! Kiss me to show that you do. Kiss me."

She pressed her lips against his with a pressure as hard as conviction, as firm as fact.

" Fay, my darling, my beloved, my heart's delight ! Oh, sweet, I can hardly believe it ! Gee, darling, I can hardly bear it."

§

If their walks and wanderings had been happy before, what were they now, when nightly they went hunting for a home of their own ? No two children playing their part in hide-and-seek or

hare-and-hounds were more absorbed than they in their game. Arm-in-arm, a mist of fantasy around them, a light of purpose in their eyes, their lips scattering hopes and visions and schemes behind them as a watercart scatters its spray, Fay often skipping in her enthusiasm, and Roddy spouting with pomposity and without cease, they went hunting along old Brixton Road, where every house was an apartment house, and along the streets off Clapham Rise, and up the slopes of Denmark Hill, and down the leafy groves of Camberwell. They skirmished with landladies as far afield as Clapham Common and Peckham Rye. "Somewhere where there are trees," acclaimed Fay, with hosannas. "Somewhere Brixton way, *I* think," said Roddy, with a fine air of worldly knowledge, though he was really yielding to the tendency, which is in us all, to turn to the places we know. Fraudulently they strolled through new-built flats, far beyond their means, and acted a most genteel and wealthy rôle before the caretaker, commenting on the chromium plating and the Oregon pine, while silently they furnished the bare white rooms with their dreams. They climbed dark staircases, and descended into basements, and studied the view from top-floor windows. They would compliment a landlady on her rooms, and leave her hoping, and come out into the street with no intention of ever going into *that* house again. There is no game like it.

A furnished room with a kitchenette ("and a view of trees," added Fay) was what they were seeking, for they had no furniture of their own and no money to buy any. The Warrens couldn't give them any, since too much of theirs, alas, was in pawn; and it was certain that Mrs. Muswell wouldn't part with a chair. She was of the anxious and clutching kind that holds to every stick of its furniture; and besides, as she explained when her conscience began to harry her, her furniture was her living. Uncle Vic, on the other hand, was for giving large chunks of it to the young people; which incensed her not a little. What she did offer, perceiving of a sudden the chance of a permanent and not unprofitable let, was the two rooms on the top landing. They could be very comfortable and private there, she said, and she wouldn't take more than fifteen shillings for them, since it was Roddy and Fay. She didn't want to make money out of Roddy and Fay; that was the last thing she wanted to do. If only she was a wealthy woman, she'd love to *give* the rooms to them; Roddy knew that, didn't he? And Roddy replied, "Of course," and "Thank you, Auntie. It's awfully kind of you to suggest it;" but to Fay he said, for the haze of sentimental loyalty was clearing from his eyes as he grew older, "Not I! Not in these trousers! As I see it, the old girl's made money out of me all her life, and now she wants to go on doing it. Well, I'm not having it this time, thank

you. I've never seen Auntie give away anything for nothing yet."

And so the happy hunting went on. The *Brixton Free Press* under Roddy's arm, with its list of Furnished Apartments solemnly pencilled, they walked from house door to house door, and room to room, night after night; and it required a hundred disappointments to teach them the lesson that Perfection is not to be found anywhere by any of Time's children. But they learned it at last in the matter of their home; and it would have been well if they had remembered it—well if at the same time, and finally, they had cleansed and tempered all their cravings in the cold solvent of its truth. But neither of them was willing to do this. Only in the matter of their home they did it, resolving to be less exacting in the future. Their other cravings, which had not yet been thwarted and trimmed enough, they kept.

And so one October evening, when the sky was clear and the stars were bright, but none the less the darker gods must have been in possession of the world, or the stars in a wild conjunction, they came to the house in Old Lane.

§

Old Lane is one of the five roads that branch from Brixton Crossways. It runs from the foot of Brixton Hill to Camberwell Green, and is, in fact, the continuation of Acre Lane, which comes down from the Clapham Hills. It is old: probably as old as the desire to get from Clapham to Camberwell. And in the old days it really was a lane. It crossed the Effra stream and ran between strawberry gardens and open fields—footpaths breaking from it for those who wanted to get to Brockwell Hall or Dulwich Manor or the old watch house on its peninsula. It crossed Cold Harbour Fields, dodged the foot of Champion Hill, and so came to Camberwell.

To-day it begins with cheap shops, runs on between terraces of tall, uniform houses, sweeps under iron railways bridges, finds new terraces and shops and laundries, and continues in the same humour to Camberwell. Yet there are points in its long sweep where, if you half shut your eyes, you can still see the old lane; and this is because a few of the old residences, with their coachhouses and haylofts, still stand at its side, decayed or derelict now, but with their gardens in front of them, and in spring the trees of the gardens are full of surprised young leaves, which veil the blackened trunks and the broken houses behind.

But it is the terraces of Victorian houses at which we must look. Precisely uniform, all of them, they are of grey brick with stucco dressings; stand four stories high from basement to cornice; and have pillared porticoes at the top of ten stone steps. Their window curtains, however, vary on every floor; and these, with the geyser vent-pipes spouting from some of the narrower windows, tell you that families are now piled upon families, like boxed goods on the draper's shelves, where once dwelt single households in a spacious and prosperous ease. It was towards one of these houses that Roddy and Fay came; and when they had found it, they stood looking up at it.

Here, then, is a long, curving London road, its high buildings founded in the mud of the old intertidal flats and replacing their sedges and reeds. In its shops the shopkeepers struggle in an economic jungle instead of a green one. Along its pavements, where once the water birds hopped and the swamp eels writhed, the young girls go tripping with much babble and laughter to laundry, factory, or office. Down the front steps, and up from the basements, come tired women with shopping bags, and they turn towards the Brixton bazaars. And beneath all the shop windows, the bright-coloured placards call the people to diversion and forgetfulness in cinema, music hall, and theatre. It is a thing to ponder on, that all the houses of entertainment have royal names: the Empress, the Prince's, the Regal, and the Palace. They summon the people of Old Lane to be kings for a while, sitting in plush splendour and sharing the royalty of laughter and forgetfulness.

But it is not to be supposed that Fay's eyes were hurt by a tragic significance in Old Lane: by its cracks of decay, its crippled trees and dying leaves, its pale laughter or heroic jollity. She walked along and looked up at the pretentious houses; and they seemed very stately, very genteel, to a daughter of Tyers Street. One here, and another there, used by a doctor or a Teeth Institute, had its stucco painted and its brickwork scraped and new-pointed, so that it looked just as it did when it was young and proud. Certainly its neighbours seemed the darker for its brightness, but at least they were of the same family and caught a reflection of its dignity. Remembering Vi's home in Modern Street, Fay thought she would be proud to live in one of them.

"Oh, I should like to live here," she exclaimed, giving her little jump as she hung on Roddy's arm. "I should be proud of a home here."

"Well, let's find the place, and go and see inside. 570. Gosh, it's a long road."

They came to the house, and paused to study it. They looked down at its basement, and up at its pillared portico, its tall windows

above, and its cornice against the star-riddled sky. The curtains were various, but the windows were clean. The door was newly painted, and its fittings shone in the lamplight. The steps were white, as if devotedly hearthstoned each morning.

"This isn't at all bad," said Roddy. "I consider it's cheap."

"For a house of this sort, yes," said Fay.

"I hope the old body's at home. It's darned late."

"Oh, I hope so!"

"Come on, then."

They went up the ten white steps. Five milk bottles, empty and clouded, stood on the balustrade beneath the portico, but these had no wound for either of them. Such things to them were normal furniture. And the door, on close inspection, was very encouraging, so new its paint, so polished its brass, so neat the metal plaque under the knocker: "Mrs. Houseman. Apartments." But there was no light behind its panels of coloured glass; and the whole house was silent.

"Gawd!" Roddy turned and grimaced at Fay. "The old biddy's in bed. They're all in bed."

"Oh no, they mustn't be. There's a light in one of the upstairs rooms. Somebody'll come."

Roddy pushed the bell. It dinged noisily just the other side of the door, and his heart beat apprehensively.

"Oh, I do hope someone's there!" repeated Fay. "I feel I shall like this place better than any I seen."

He rang again; and his heart thumped like a fist knocking on a door.

Steps in the hall. The coloured glass of the door lit up. The door opened.

A large, heavy, peering figure, wrapped round with a flowered overall, stood in the light. Quicker and more experienced eyes than Roddy's would have learned much about Mrs. Houseman at a glance. In her neat black hair, lined with silver, in her clean round face and clean fat hands, in her overall washed till its colours had paled, they would have read that passion for cleanliness that is almost a disease. She was as clean as her door and her steps. In the small, black, searching eyes that probed Roddy first and Fay next, they would have seen the caution, the suspicion, the curiosity, and the hard self-serving, of a woman who has followed the calling of a landlady for thirty years. They were eyes that had seen much and distrusted most, but still probed inquisitively. At the same time they were the eyes of a woman who would "act by" her lodgers, if she approved them, as fairly as she expected them to act by her. She would serve them as thoroughly as she scoured her steps or her stairs.

What Roddy did remark was her resemblance to Mrs. Muswell.

Where did it lie? Not in her features, which were rounder; not in her hair, which was darker; not in her figure, which was heavier, nor in her dress, which was more punctiliously tidy. It must be in her expression: in those searching, acquisitive eyes. He did not pass on to the thought that all professions are likely to stamp their impress on their followers, and that most landladies, after thirty years' traffic with tenants, have searching, dubious, money-anxious eyes.

"Yes?" she inquired.

"It's Mrs. Houseman?" asked Roddy, in his most mannerly voice.

"Yes. Mrs. Houseman. That's right."

"I'm awfully sorry it's so late, but we read your advertisement about a furnished room——"

"It is late."

"Yes, but we hadn't much other time to come——"

"Is this your wife?"

"No, but. . . ." And he smiled.

"Oh!" Mrs. Houseman smiled too at the everlasting jest of two young people marrying. "And you were wanting a home for after you're married?"

"That's right."

"And when would that be?"

Roddy grinned awkwardly. "Just as soon as we can find somewhere to live."

"Well, what's your occupation? We don't take anyone, you see."

"No, of course not. I'm an assistant in a large firm, and my young lady's a cinema usherette."

"Yes," said Fay, feeling that she should be taking a part.

"You've got references, I suppose?"

"Oh yes. My auntie and uncle live only just round the corner, on Brixton Hill. Aldous House. He's a professor of music there—and, in his way, very well known."

"And I'm sure the manager'd speak for me," suggested Fay to Roddy, determined to be speaking to someone.

"Of course," nodded Roddy, turning to her.

"And there's Mr. Sandars, of the Red Domes. He'd do anything I arst him."

"Yes," agreed Roddy enthusiastically.

"Well, I don't mind showing you the room," Mrs. Houseman broke in upon their duologue. "If you'll step inside."

Roddy stepped back for Fay to enter, and she walked in with a small sway of her shoulders that was at once ladylike and worldly-wise. He followed behind her. And so they passed into the house in Old Lane.

Cleanliness. Cleanliness was the first thing that smote upon them in that narrow hall. The floorcloth shone; the brown dado shone; and so did the table and old-fashioned hat stand. A smell of beeswax and furniture polish haunted the stagnant, close air. That it was stagnant and close, and held the smells of the ghosts of old meals, was little enough to them. They met the same air daily in their own halls.

Mrs. Houseman was leading the way up the stairs. Everything burnished here too: the treads, the linoleum, the banisters, and the embossed dado that accompanied them up the wall. Everything was painted a dark brown, which did not make for light and cheer, but pleased with its cleanliness. Hardly a scratch or blister in the paint anywhere: doubtless Mrs. Houseman or her husband went round with the paint to cover up the slightest scar.

"You keep everything very nice," said Fay.

"Yes, both me and Mr. Houseman like things kep' nice. He works at the Castle Hotel, but he's a good one with his hands in the house. He does all our decorating and carpent'ring, as you might say."

"That's nice," said Fay.

"Yes. . . ." Mrs. Houseman sighed heavily, and halted on the half-way landing for a breath. Her breathlessness suggested cardiac asthma. A light behind the coloured panes of a door threw geometrical slabs of colour on the brown walls. She pointed to the door while her breath came. "There's a bathroom and lavat'ry in there," said she, and sighed again, "but there's someone inside. Yes, we had that bath put in when we come here."

"Well, that's convenient," said Fay.

"Yes."

A door opened on the top landing high above them; footfalls creaked along some boards; and low voices spoke. Immediately as in a reflex action, Mrs. Houseman lifted her questing eyes towards the sounds, and, standing motionless, breathless, and alert, twisted her head so that one ear could catch the slightest word.

Fay saw nothing significant in this quick inquisitiveness. Why should not Mrs. Houseman stand straining to know what these muted sounds might mean? As for Roddy, he did not see Mrs. Houseman's movement at all, because he was peering through the darkness to make out a picture on the wall.

"Yes." Mrs. Houseman, her breath recovered, but her curiosity defeated, resumed her climb. She brought them to the first landing. It was very dark here because all the three brown doors were shut. She opened the nearest door, and walked into the blackness of a room. After fumbling in her overall pocket for

matches, she lit a gas mantle. Under its white, unshaded, incandescent light the room sprang into life before them.

"There." Mrs. Houseman deflated herself heavily.

The room pleased Roddy and Fay. An iron-and-brass double bed stood against the wall behind the door. It was covered by a bed-spread of white cotton, somewhat washed-out now, but once stamped with sprigs of bright blue flowers. Nothing, nothing, nothing said that white cotton bed-spread to Fay. An oval table with a red cloth stood under a three-light window. All the pieces of a green saddle-bag suite—chairs, arm-chairs, and sofa—stood about the floor. There was a small sideboard, bright with cheap china and glass; and, most impressive piece of furniture of all, a towering mahogany tallboy, reaching almost to the ceiling.

"Plenty of nice drawers," said Fay.

"Yes, that's what I said to Mr. Houseman. I said, First thing a lady'll look for is plenty of drawers and cupboard room. Here's the cooker and things."

She drew aside a high home-made screen, pasted over with all the Christmas cards of her youth, and disclosed in a corner a gas cooker, a sink, and a refuse bucket. "You see, that's all nicely out of the way. Mr. Houseman made this screen. He made it on purpose."

"That's very convenient." Fay nodded, and pictured herself cooking nice little meals there. "I think we could be very comfortable here."

"Yes, I like my people to be comfortable."

"It's nice, isn't it, Roddy?"

"Very."

"Yes," said Mrs. Houseman, "I don't see what a young couple can want more."

She had walked to the window, and was pulling back the curtains. "The view's lovely. Everyone says what a lovely view it is; but of course it's dark now."

They followed her and looked out.

Lovely was too large a word, even though the night had hidden all blemishes and left only silhouettes and light. The window was happily placed in that it looked straight down a long ravine formed by the backs of tall and once stately houses and filled with the handsome old trees of their long back gardens. The two side streets, whose houses these were, had been laid so straight, and were so long and flat, that this leafy ravine seemed to stretch to the base of the sky. Stars twinkled at the end of the vista, and the light from upper windows fell on the domes of the trees.

"Yes," said Mrs. Houseman at the window, "I always say to Mr. Houseman that we shoulda kep' this room for ourselves. It's

the best room in the house, really, but we took the two ground-floor rooms. It was more convenient, like."

"Well, I'm taken with it, I must say," admitted Roddy. "Fifteen shillings, I think your advertisement said."

"Yes. I usually get fifteen shillings for it, but I might consider twelve and six for a very long let. You wouldn't be wanting attendance, you see."

"Well, it's certainly very nice, isn't it, Fay?"

"Yes, I like it much better than most we seen."

"I don't see what a young couple can want more, really," Mrs. Houseman commented.

"No. . . ." Roddy hesitated. Decision was difficult.

"When would you expect to be wanting it? It doesn't stay empty long. The lady and gentleman who had it only left last Saturday. Single gentlemen like it, though of course I do for them."

"I'm afraid I can't say for certain for a few days."

"Well, perhaps you'd like to leave a deposit. I could undertake to keep it free then."

Roddy was disconcerted by this, but he was sufficiently afraid of Mrs. Houseman, sufficiently eager to stand before her as a man of means, and sufficiently anxious to keep a lien on the room, to hand her, with uncertain and rueful fingers, his only ten shilling note. She took it, quite unimpressed, and pushed it into her overall pocket; and he felt as if she had put him there too; for where his treasure was, thither he would return. It was almost decisive, since it was hardly within his strength to leave a ten shilling note unredeemed. He had never done such a thing in his life before. Shaken, he glanced round the room again, with its clean furniture and pleasant outlook, determined to like it even more; then walked slowly and rather sadly to the door behind Fay. Mrs. Houseman drew the curtains across the window, and extinguished the harsh white light, and the room went out of existence again.

They said friendly farewells to Mrs. Houseman at the open front door, and went down the steps into the night. As soon as the door shut behind them, Fay took his arm and, hugging it against her, danced along at its side. "Oh, I like it, I like it! Oh, let's have it, Roddy. I'm sure we could be awfully happy there. And such a nice address too, 'Old Lane, Brixton'! Oh, I want it, Roddy!"

"I don't fancy losing my ten bob, I must say," said Roddy, still feeling as if he had left a part of himself in that room.

"Well, that settles it," she laughed, dancing on. "We've really decided at last: can you believe it? Oh, I'm frightfully

pleased. And I *love* old Ma Houseman. A bit grim perhaps, but I'm sure she's got a heart. And *so* clean! Oh, I think it's a divine place." And she began to sing and hum at his side, as they wandered on.

XV

EVERY blessing fell upon the marriage of Fay Warren to Roddy Stewart. Miracles happened. At first Fay had supposed that they would be married quietly and cheaply on a Sunday morning in the Sabbath calm that broods over London. She remembered Vi's marriage, and Gracie's. In each case the couple, bridal garments notwithstanding, had been one of a batch lined up before the altar rails in a dim-lit and empty church, and two curates, one working from one end and one from the other, had joined their lives together as rapidly as possible in the hour before Matins. Afterwards there had been some forced festivity in the basement at Tyers Street, and then bride and groom had gone to their new home, and the man had returned to his work in the morning.

Such a wedding seemed normal to Vauxhall, but it offended the sensibilities of Brixton. "I'm not going to be married one of a batch; I know *that*," said Roddy. "And I'm not having you married like that, either. Gosh, no!"

But it was difficult to see how such a wedding could be avoided unless they waited till next summer when they would have holidays and perhaps a little money in the savings bank.

And then the miracles began to happen.

First, something happened to Steve, and it surprised no one so much as himself. To state it simply, brotherly love descended upon him in power. Inspiration filled him. His initial feeling had been one of irritation at having to spend good money on a wedding present for young Fay, but suddenly a very different and very captivating idea began to form in him. It had its genesis in many things. In part it was sheer clean generosity, to gusts of which he was always liable; in part it was a rising of his conscience which counselled him so often that he did not do enough for his family; in part it was a swell of pride in being the successful son, and a desire to display the fact; and in part it sprang from the flattering notion that he was "really the head of the family," now that the old man was financially dead. The inspiration grew in beauty and delight as he dwelt upon it. He would give the kid—what?—a fiver—yes, dammit, a fiver—and tell her to spend it on a slap-up wedding. So pleasant, so potent, the idea that it

jumped him out of his chair and sent him through the evening to Tyers Street. And no man walking the roads between Camberwell and Vauxhall that night carried a happier burden of thought. To him that hath shall be given, and by the time his feet were in Kennington his determination to give her five pounds had enlarged into the desire to give her ten ; and as he turned into Tyers Street, this desire had strengthened into knowledge. And it sang in his heart, and, like the sons of God (one of which, to be sure, it was) it shouted for joy.

It was a gracious guest to present to his mother. "See here, Mum : I'm not having my sister married anyhow. She can only be married once, poor kid ; and for anyone as pretty as she not to have a real slap-up wedding would be a crying shame. She'll want all those lovelies at her cinema to come along and see her in her glory. Naturally. Tell her she's to have the dress she fancies, and a swell party with eats and drinks, and anything else she's set her heart on. You can count on me for a tenner, see. Yes, up to a tenner."

"Oh, Steve," murmured his mother, and her eyes filled with love and tears, "you can never afford it."

"Oh yes, I can. Or I'm going to, anyhow. I'm fond of little Fay. It's going to be my present to her, and if there's a bit over, you can buy her a cruet stand, or a commode, or something."

"You *are* a good boy. Oh, she *will* be delighted."

Fay was more than delighted, but did her joy equal Steve's ? It is doubtful. When honest kindness is mixed with self-satisfaction and a sense of power, and with the praise of men, you drink indeed of hydromel.

Next, Gilly Muswell. Steve's grand action had an unexpected effect on Gilly ; he began to be inspired too. Roddy, always nervous lest the Muswells, though impressed by the beauty of his bride, were not at all impressed by the Warren family, had promptly displayed the munificence of Steve ; and Gilly, hearing of it at the breakfast table, had sat thereafter in thought. He had taken his thought with him into the street. He too regarded himself as the successful son. He too liked to think that he was now "for all practical purposes the head of the family." He too liked to act in the grand way. The only difference between his inspiration and Steve's was that it contracted instead of expanding, as he walked to his work. His first wild idea had been to give young Roddy a fiver, but discretion overcame him in the middle of Brixton Crossways, and he reduced it to three quid. However, with his father's whimsicality, he posted a letter to his cousin with the money in it, and so timed the posting that the letter would entertain the breakfast table the next morning. And when Roddy opened

it, and gasped, and spluttered his thanks, Gilly said only, "Hey, what's that? Three quid? Did I really? Good God, I wish I hadn't. I musta been drunk. However, let it stand."

"I say, Gilly, it's absolutely topping of you."

"Not at all. Not at all. Wish it was twice as much. But never let it be said that the family didn't do its part. Tell you my idea. That other bloke's putting up the cost of the wedding. I'd like you to stand that kid a nice little dinner somewhere, afterwards, and take her to a show, see. That's my contribution to the great day. You're not to spend less than a quid on a supper and a show."

"Gee, Gilly, it's—it's just prime of you."

"Rats!" But it was a happy young man who strode to his furniture shop that morning.

Then Fay's first lover, Father Sullivan, bore down upon the field in power. He was not so young now, nor so slender, nor a curate any more. He was now the corpulent vicar of a dockside parish in Rotherhithe; but he was as jocund as ever, and as brim-full of picturesque ideas. Fay, who had always loved him because he admired her, had written to ask him if he would "marry her"; and the letter was not in his pocket before he was bearing down upon Tyers Street. Like a boisterous wind he burst into the Warrens' home. And if he had loved Fay when she was an untidy child with her hair hacked across her brow, he loved her now, with a melting heart, when he thought of her as a bride.

"Marry you, my love? Of course I'll marry you," he shouted. "And I'll damned well see"—these high churchman swore quite merrily—"that no one else does. I christened you, didn't I—more or less—and I'll jolly well marry you. I'll fix that up with the vicar all right. But where's the reception to be? The goings-on, I mean?"

"Oh, here, I suppose."

"Nonsense, child, nonsense. There's no room here for all the people we're going to have. Why, there's hardly room for me nowadays. We can do better than that for you. I'll tell Father Foort he's got to let you have the church hall. Where you used to act, eh? D'you remember Joan of Arc, and Rebecca at the Well, and Deirdre of the Sorrows? Begorra, I'll decorate the place myself! I'm not sure I shan't get the old spotlight out."

"Oh, Father Sullivan, how lovely! How gorgeous! Oh, thanks ever so."

Fay's eyes were as alight as when the spotlight played on them; and it was a happy Father Sullivan who strode off to find Father Foort.

So Fay's wedding was a spectacle for the women of Tyers Street:

An enormous car, from Steve's garage, waited before her door with its white ribbons fluttering; and all the children of the neighbourhood stood around it. All the women were at their doors or at their windows. And Fay came down her dusky steps in a white satin dress, a tulle veil, and a coronet, with a sheaf of lilies in her white-gloved hand. And the women exclaimed, "Oh, don't she look a treat?" and "Don't she look *lovely* with them lilies and all?" and "I've never seen a lovelier little bride. Never. That I'll swear. . . . She got her orange blossom all right"; and "This is a great day for her, this is; I'm glad she's got a nice day for it. Happy the bride the sun shines on." And they wept, as they wished her well.

They had already seen Fay's mother go weeping to the church.

Fay found the church gay with chrysanthemums of every colour (*décor* by Father Sullivan) and better stocked with friends and watchers than she had dared to hope. It was early in the day, and all her friends from the New Olympic were there in bright dresses. So were many from the Red Domes. So were a few from the Thames Swan Laundry. Roddy sat there in a new grey suit, with a white flower in his button-hole, and a blue handkerchief peeping above his breast pocket. And his family behind him looked handsome and distinguished—especially Uncle Vic, with his white carnation in his old-time morning coat, his breast held high behind a fawn waistcoat, and his silver hair bushing out from his large head. And she had two rotund priests to marry her, in their stoles of white and gold, Father Sullivan and Father Foort. And she had an organist too, commandeered by Father Sullivan; and he greeted her with the Trumpet Overture and sent her on her way with the Wedding March.

So with music and singing Fay was married to Roddy amid the heaviness of the flowers; and then the company moved like a migration across the sunny churchyard to the church hall. And there once again, in that familiar room, she was the centre of the tableaux, and Father Sullivan was her stage manager, scene setter, and general stage hand. He had dropped the curtain and primed the front of the stage with flowers. From the roof he had festooned the pennons and flags which were used for the Christmas parties. He had bidden the caterers spread their table beneath the stage. He had arranged the rush-seated chairs (some of which had beards hanging down) against the walls. You would have supposed that he and his friends were going to dance. And it even happened, though he could hardly have arranged this, that the sun, standing at its noonday height, sent a spotlight through the window in the roof. In its spreading beam the dust-motes danced and set to partners and jigged back to the wall.

The so-familiar pictures looked down upon the assembling people : The King and the Sistine Madonna, old bearded vicars and The Scapegoat, King Edward VII and The Infant Samuel, and Christ Leaving the Prætorium—through a cloud of mildew. And the framed texts on the walls, many of them painted by children, seemed to ask a blessing on the party : " God is our Refuge and Strength," " Keep Smiling," and " Lord, Thou art in the Midst of Us."

As usual, however, an uninvited guest, without a wedding garment, attended the assembly, and moved among the guests, till he was cast forth. His name was Embarrassment. Here were too few guests in a hall too large. They just sat against the walls and obeyed the behest to keep smiling. But Steve, with noisy help from Father Sullivan, soon had him out of the room. " Keep on eating, you people," said Steve, going round with the dishes. " This'll save you the cost of your dinner. You can even take some of the muck home : it's all paid for. Sherry, Dad ? I know you'd rather have beer, but it isn't done at weddings and funerals—it just isn't done—and we got to be ladies and gentlemen for once. Keep your eye on Mum, and see she doesn't drink too much. Come on, Roddy, have a sandwich. Pack up your troubles in your old kitbag, and smile, boy, smile."

Roddy was certainly rather silent, and when he spoke his voice broke. He was proud of his place as the hero of the moment, and proud of his radiant bride, but his stomach was sick with the thought that he'd have to make a speech. His longing to distinguish himself as a speaker was having an all-in fight with his terror of failing and making a fool of himself. He was sweeping the whole tract of his memory in search of witty remarks, and finding none. He was committing whole sentences to memory, and suffering heart-falls as he imagined himself forgetting them. Sweat was forming on his brow and on his hands.

Fay was nothing but happy. No speech loomed ahead of her to make sickly her joy. She was now a " Mrs." and could speak of " My husband," and everybody was saying, " Darling, you look a treat." She had had an " incredibly wonderful " wedding in the church, and she was the centre of the festival now. And if her young husband was not *exactly* her ideal, still he was very attractive, as everybody was telling her, and she was really " terribly, terribly fond of him."

Uncle Vic sat silent too. As the most distinguished person present—though why distinguished no one was quite clear—he was to propose the toast ; and the fact was that he was in precisely the same case as Roddy. The palms of his big hands were damp. Sweat was moistening his shrubs of grey hair. He was suffering within his body as well as without, so that more than once he had

to retire from the room. In the retirement which he found at the end of a lobby, and behind its bolted door, he jotted down some notes on an envelope, conned some phrases by heart, and rehearsed some gestures with his hands. But sometimes the gesture was left in the air, because he had forgotten the words, and he had to consult his envelope, while his heart lay dying.

Now it was time for the toast. It was also time for Steve's surprise. Steve had a surprise hidden away, and had been longing to uncover it. Inspiration begets inspiration; generosity is so sweet a drink that it tempts one to drink again.

"Pity there's no phizz!" he shouted. "Golly, we ought to have had phizz. Mr. Muswell's going to propose the young couple's health, and where, I ask you, is the phizz? Gwen, why didn't you do something about it?"

"Is it time now?" asked Uncle Vic wistfully, as Steve swept past him.

"Just a moment, Mr. Muswell. Don't kick off yet, sir. I've half an idea. Wait till I come back."

"I see. Thank you."

And Uncle Vic sat with his distresses, rapidly recalling his opening sentences, and trying to control the wind in his body. Once he failed, and belched—but not too noisily. He wondered if he would have time to go into retirement once more.

Steve had disappeared. He reappeared. He reappeared with two bottles of champagne crossed above his head, as the whisky bottles are crossed behind the processional haggis. He proceeded all round the room with them, and the boys, discerning the joke, and ready to be riotous, cheered and whistled and made loud pops by straining their fingers under their cheeks, while the women laughed and applauded. Steve concluded his one-man procession by banging the bottles on the table in front of the cake. Speedily the boys filled the glasses.

"Now then, Mr. Muswell. Come on, sir. Silence! Silence, all!"

Uncle Vic rose. He flung back his coat and put his fingers in his waistcoat pockets. His knee might be trembling in its trouser, but he had a stage sense, and intended to obey it—at least till disaster silenced him. No battleship could have flown its flag more bravely, though aware that it was holed beneath the water line.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I believe it is the custom to be facetious on these occasions, but I'm not sure that I feel facetious to-day. I feel very happy; I feel full of goodwill to this dear young couple

of ours ; I feel, if I may say so, most deeply moved ; but I find it hard to feel facetious——”

“ Have some phizz,” shouted Gilly, which was an awkward shot across the bows of Uncle Vic, who had been steaming towards an affecting sentiment.

“ What ? No . . . ” Uncle Vic’s decks were awash, but his guns continued firing. “ Just let me continue. As I was saying, it is hard to feel facetious when one’s heart is full. And mine is very full ; very full. This young Roddy has been like a son to me and my dear wife, and we know him through and through, and I’m going to say here and now that he is one of the best. Let me assure you, my dear little Fay, or, may I say, my dear Mrs. Stewart——”

Loud cheers, while Fay smiled and looked down.

“ I can assure you, dear little lady, that you have found one of the best husbands in the world. He is a dear boy : I have always said so. I—er—I still say so . . . ” His memory was playing him tricks here, and he was gaining time. “ I shall continue to say so . . . I . . . and then, as for the bride herself, ladies and gentlemen, I cannot pretend to have known her as long as some of you, but all that I have seen of her has taught me to love her—to love her very dearly, I think I may say—and this I will add : that, if she is as good as she is beautiful——”

Shouts of “ She is ! ” and “ She isn’t,” and “ She couldn’t be that ” ; and one from Father Sullivan, “ She *is*, bad cess to ye all ! I know her. I was in love with her before any of you.”

“ She is, I am sure,” continued the speaker ; “ and therefore I say that young Roddy should be—as indeed I am sure he is—the happiest youth in London to-day. The next happiest is me.” Some laughter, but not as much as Uncle Vic had hoped. “ And now, my dears ”—he had swayed gracefully towards Roddy and Fay, who were standing opposite the cake—“ I long, I long sincerely, because I feel such a real goodwill towards you, to say at least one thing that you will remember always, and that will sometimes, maybe, return to you to help you. May I give you a golden rule because it *is* golden. What is true of all life is doubly true of marriage, which, after all, is only life at high pressure ”—loud laughter—which Uncle Vic had not foreseen, but which pleased him——“ and my golden rule is this : ‘ Go into it more to give than to get, and you’ll get all.’ ”

Mrs. Muswell looked down at the plate on her lap. Her thoughts were her own.

“ Only strive for each other, rather than for yourself, and your happiness is secure. Remember always : what you give you keep,

and what you keep you lose. A thousand times I have proved the truth of that in my own life. Whenever I have given some small monetary help to a fellow wayfarer, I have bought with it happiness for ever; when I have refrained from doing so, I have kept a pound in my purse, but no comfort in my heart. However, I do not want to speak about myself. No. My day is done; the day of these young people is opening before them. May it be the best of summer days. On behalf of all here, my dears, I wish you full happiness and long life in which to enjoy it. Believe me, my dears, my heart is full; very full. Very full. I lift my glass to you, as you set out together on this adventure into happiness. God go with you. God be in your head, and in your understanding; God be in your eyes and in your looking; God be in your mouth, and in your speaking, as we used to sing when I conducted the Streatham Hill Glee Chorus. But that is a long time ago now—yes. Ladies and Gentlemen, the Bride and Bridegroom.”

Was Father Sullivan at the ancient piano? He was. Born play producer as he was, he immediately lifted the company to its feet, and into the chorus of “For they are jolly good fellows”; which Uncle Vic, basking in the memory of a most moving speech, and remembering his profession, and his distinction in it, began to conduct, with his glass for a baton. Like a wave the chorus lifted and broke into three stormy cheers, Father Sullivan leading them hoarsely.

Then cheers for Roddy, as, redder than any flag or pennon hanging above him, he turned to speak.

“I’m afraid I’m no good at this sort of thing, and can’t hope to compete with Uncle Vic, but on behalf of my wife”—loud laughter, a new wife being the most comical thing in the world—“I do thank you for coming along to-day to wish us well, and . . . for all your good wishes, and I can only say that I hope me and Fay will make a better business of it than some—”

He had meant this quite seriously, but the hilarious company took it as a joke, and shouted with laughter; and he was pleased. Moreover, they seemed to regard it as the end of his speech; which relieved him, even as it took him aback. He sipped from his glass, and all the other things which he has conned by heart remained unsaid.

His speech behind him, and not unsuccessful, he was released into happiness. An ecstasy filled him. He was a married man! He had Fay—*Fay* for his delight! He loved, and was loved by, something beautiful. To-night he would sink his life into hers and possess her, and almost die in the sweetness of it. It was incredible. Life had granted him one of his hopes in a measure that matched his dreams.

§

And in their room in Old Lane, though there was inexperience and disappointment at first, they found together one of the two things in which the poorest is equal with the richest, and the grocer's boy with the king. Darkness shut out that unlovely room, passion shut out the uneasy circumstance of their lives, and they found together that moment of eternity and perfection, when those who love heal, each for the other, the jagged incompleteness of life.

The other thing is sleep.

PART III

I

THESE are the ghosts of Lambeth Reach.

You may stand on the bridge, as Roddy and Fay did, and look up the reach towards the Strand, and you will see the red palaces and the busy embankments, but you will see little traffic on the stream. A tug may beat towards you, towing its coal barges to the power stations up stream, and dip its funnel and pass under the second span; but afterwards the reach will be quiet again, with only the pontoon of Lambeth Pier creaking against its piles, and the moored barges lifting and complaining on the wind-raked tide, and the seagulls squealing. You must do something to your eyes, if you would see it crowded with its ghosts. They are many; for where in all the long journey of the Thames from the Cotswolds to the Nore was there a brisker, livelier, sadder sheet of water than this of Lambeth Reach?

It was busy from the beginning. Here, before the King built his palace at Westminster, or the bishop his palace at Lambeth, was the old ford from Thorney Island (which is Westminster) to the merchants' causeway across Lambeth Marsh. Here was the old ferry, soon to become a horse-ferry and carry the pack horses and the saddle horses and the tilt carts from Horseferry Road on the Middlesex bank to Horseferry Lane on the Surrey side. Does not this leaping bridge shadow the site of the old ferry? Live again before our eyes, old Lambeth Reach. Show us thy ghosts, both merry and sad. Let us hear again thy laughter, which was loud, and feel thy sorrows, which were many. So many. The fishermen are out in their coracles, fetching up the salmon and the sea fish from the brackish tide. The Roman galleys come up the reach, for there is no London Bridge as yet to stem them. The Roman ships pass; and here come the Viking ships, painted and gilded from figurehead to sternpost, long ships riding lightly. And Norman ships, with one square-rigged sail and a steering oar. Yonder goes the Black Prince's boat, ferrying him to his palace at Kennington Cross. See the tilt boats, with their bales and their hogsheads under their hoods, heading down the tideway to Gravesend. London is spreading on the northern slopes and on the southern flats, and what a population now of skiffs and wherries! Not yet can the roads stand up to English rains, not yet are the bridges built, save only London Bridge, and

the river is everyone's highway, and forty thousand watermen, either apprenticed and sworn not to commit fornication, or time-served and free, are there, in three thousand wherries plying along its banks, or sculling from stairs to stairs. The watermen are the cabmen of the day, and I doubt not their language is similar to that which will be employed by their posterity in the cabs. And if the wherries are the taxis of the well-to-do, and the ferries are the omnibuses of the poor, then these long gilded barges, with their eight oars levering the water, are the coaches of the great. This tapestried barge, with its rowers in scarlet liveries, is bringing the King to visit and trouble the Archbishop. Here comes the barge of my Lord Mayor, with trumpeters in its brow to herald the approach of the City to the Church. There goes the Archbishop's barge, putting off from Lambeth Stairs: His Grace is taking water to Whitehall to flatter or flutter His Majesty. And let us not miss a glimpse of His Grace's servants, bringing supplies across the water for his heaped and hospitable board, or just returning to their tasks in his household—his bakers, butlers, butchers, cooks, larderers, ushers, gamators (what are they?), stewards, harbingers, squilleries (again what?), almoner, treasurer, marshal, comptroller, clerk of the kitchen, clerk of the spicery, carver, server, and cup-bearer. All these are on Cranmer's pay-roll; and Cardinal Pole, his successor, had a hundred servants in his halls, by a patent of Philip and Mary. A princely street, this ribbon of the Thames between the palaces!

Aye, great liveliness and laughter hast thou known, old reach; but what of thy sorrows? So many, so many. Here came the great men out of the palaces, and went down the river, with the axe turned towards them. Somerset, Strafford, and Sidney; Lords Derwentwater, Kilmarnock, Balmerino, and Lovat; Sir Thomas More, a spare figure with a keen face and a mysterious, gentle smile, who has just said "No" a second time, after tarrying awhile in the burnt chamber, looking out on the bishop's garden; Archbishop Laud, with a load of books and papers in his hands, wherewith to defend himself at his trial, and his prayer book too, for he has first heard Evensong in his chapel; Anne Boleyn, her thoughts with the little Elizabeth—they come from the water-gates, or down the riverside stairs, and I suspect they do not see the daylight glistening on the ripples for the shining of the axe that is turned towards them. And here on a stormy night, when the rain is thrashing the water, a small boat struggles obliquely across the reach. It is hurrying a veiled woman with a child in her arms from Westminster to Lambeth Stairs. She runs up the stairs, huddling the child against her, and shelters from the driven rain in that shadowed recess over there—do you see?—between the church tower and the Archbishop's wall. It is poor cover, but

she cowers there, while they find the coach that shall carry her to Gravesend and the sanctuary of a ship bound for France. She is one who has lost a crown, Mary of Modena, queen of James II, and the babe she protects is the Old Pretender.

Great and famous ghosts, old reach ! But I would spare a memory for some others, who also came to Lambeth Stairs. These were they who had no state trials, but conducted their own processes, in lonely rooms of London, or on benches in her parks beneath a gallery of unpitying stars, arraigning themselves as failures, and considering the evidence, and pronouncing the verdict ; and then carried themselves through the night to the river to execute the sentence. The river, its lusty tide held by embanking walls, had fathered their city ; and the city had shaped their overthrow ; and now they were come back to the river to compel it to recompense them with peace. Hardly a day passed, not so very long ago, but somewhere along the length of London's river, one of them leapt out of hopelessness into peace, and joined the drift-wood. Those who were found between Waterloo Pier and Nine Elms were brought to Lambeth Stairs, and laid in a shed in a corner of the churchyard, where they rested for a while beside the admirals and the antiquaries under the altar tombs.

Such are the ghosts that cross the windrows on thy water, old reach, as we watch from the bridge. And still the tide slides under the bridge, like Time under the span of Eternity, which, silent, stable, and high above the mists of pity, looks down upon the things that slide away.

II

FAY sat at the table by the window, her chin cupped in her hands, her eyes staring out at the long canyon between the house-backs. The long canyon, and the clear blue sky, were full of light ; and somehow there was a link between this light and her meditation, but she did not know what it was, for she had little introspection. She knew only that in her head was a vacillating, haunting thought which caused her heart either to hammer with hope or to hover in nervousness. She dropped her eyes to the piece of paper on the table, and read again the address : " Mr. A. Muir, Queen's Theatre, Clapham Rise."

" Shall I go ? Shall I go ? "

Her brow ached whenever the arguments for " No " were in the ascendant ; the ache disappeared, as if an anæsthetic had touched it, and her head filled with light, whenever " Yes " was gaining on them. And therefore, in the depths of her heart, she knew that " Yes " would win, and she would go.

" Roddy won't like it, and there'll be an awful row, but I can't help it, I can't help it. I can't sacrifice my life *completely* to him. It's not fair, I mean. It's not reasonable. A girl can't go on like this for ever. She just *can't*."

She gazed again at the long leafy gully between the high precipices of the house-backs. Fancy ! Nearly two years. It was nearly two years since that morning when she sprang from her bed after her wedding night, and pulled back the curtains, and, throwing up the window, looked out upon this view and rejoiced in it. So fine it seemed after the backyard at Tyers Street. And now—now, sometimes, it pressed upon her and chafed her, and this change was a disappointment and a worry. She had fought against it, not unheroically, using disbelief and laughter as her weapons. But it was not to be defeated thus. Those high, flat walls, receding against the sky, *would* menace her at times like the walls of a prison yard ; the flat floor between them, full of trees, *would* seem like a parable of her life, set straight between undeviating walls for ever. For ever. And she was only twenty-two.

" Is this the end ? Is it to be nothing but this for ever ? "

The oblong gardens, with their grey brick walls, offended her this evening. It was an evening in summer, but London withers its green things before the autumn strikes them ; and already the

leaves of these sycamores and limes had death on their edges. The youngest ivy on the trellises was dark with soot—as dark as the black earth beneath or the trunks of the trees. Hens foraged in mangy turf, and lean cats, slyly alert, prowled among dustbins, scrap metal, and scattered waste.

“Oh, golly, golly . . .” sighed Fay. “But cheer up, woman. Keep smiling, Fay, my dear. Keep smiling, Mrs. Stewart. Nothing’s as bad as it looks, not really.”

Her gaze roamed over the gardens. In the garden on the right Mr. Hilton was fitting a new front to his chicken house, and it was made of an old Venetian blind. In the garden on the left Mrs. Paget, with a bandana handkerchief around her head, and a loose cigarette at her lips, was beating a rug; and the rug was frayed and holed; and Mrs. Paget, though little older than thirty, was shapeless and slack. In a garden up the gully a woman was unpegging her washing, and, though it was after six, her hair was still in curlers. And presently, down her conservatory steps into the garden below, came Ma Houseman, her head in a dust cap, her body in a spotless overall, her plump hands holding a shining dustpan. Some of the heavier contents of the dustpan she knocked with a cautious finger into her dustbin, which was as nearly spotless as a dustbin can be; the rest she tipped into her little incinerator, for Ma Houseman, with her hatred of dust and dirt, made the capable Mr. Houseman burn everything that was combustible in the incinerator. Returned to the foot of her conservatory steps, she halted and sighed asthmatically. And before climbing the steps she looked up at every window of her house, suspiciously.

Fay drew back. “Oh, well. . . . But is this my life for ever? Is this the end, as you might say? Working at the shop all day, and coming back to this at night? Is it, is it, is it?” And she glanced down again at the paper:

“ ‘Mr. A. Muir, Queen’s Theatre. . . .’ ”

Cupping her chin in her hand again, she turned her eyes towards the glow in the sky as unconsciously as a flower turns towards the light. The sky was of pale turquoise and primrose; and the sun, drifted behind a single cloud, cast a halo around it; but, though veiled, its light fell on the eastern housebacks, and picked out with clean precision their brick courses and their brick pointing. The end of the long vista was a desert of boundless light.

The sky and the town. The sky above and the town below. Eternity and Time. Cleanness and eternal newness, spread above tumbledown houses and slow decay, like a saint’s benediction of a beggar.

There were not Fay’s thoughts, of course. She could no more have thought them than the flower can analyse the sun, as it turns

its face towards it. Why, she hardly knew that it was this siren light in the sky, among other things, which was tempting her to cast forth again in search of some beauty.

"Mr. A. Muir, Queen's Theatre . . ."

§

The simple fact—and at least she was good-hearted enough to be sad about it—was that she was wearying a little of this place, wearying of her one-room home, and, worst of all, wearying of Roddy. She didn't want to weary of Roddy. She was fond of him, and wanted him to be the fulfilment of her hopes. But she couldn't deny her visiting thoughts; she couldn't forget her frequent little sicknesses of disappointment. He was so jealous and possessive in his love, so exacting, so ridiculously easy to hurt, so quick to turn sour and sulk. They had had merry times together; they had had riotous times together; they had had ecstatic times together, but of late a danger seemed always in their path—the danger that he would be wounded and huffed, and sink into silence.

"Perhaps if I go to this new job, which will be as interesting and jolly as the work at Walton's is hateful, I shan't be so dissatisfied with him. I shall be ever so much happier and nicer; and I shan't be for ever saying and doing things that rile him. But he won't see it like that. He won't like it a little bit. He'll never see that I'm doing it half for his sake."

But, even as she said this, she knew that it was disingenuous; that she would not be going to the theatre for his sake, but for her own; that she would be carrying there a vague, formless hope that it would open a way to—to what? To a second chance. . . .

"He'll never really do anything in the world. He'll stay in that grocer's shop for ever. I'm sure of that now. I suppose it's not his fault, but in a sense you might say that he tricked me, because he always said he was going to set to and make money and do wonderful things. He got me on false pretences, as you might say: there's no getting away from that. And if that's the truth, I don't see why I shouldn't go and find what fun I can. I don't really."

Fay's life in Old Lane had been richer than her life in Tyers Street; it had been luxurious compared with Vi's in Mordern Street; but Tyers Street and Mordern Street had receded down two years of time, and were too remote now to point the contrast. And, once the healing of that contrast was exhausted, all her old fears were able to come back and gibber at her: the fear of losing her beauty before she had bought enough with it; of turning into

a weary housewife like her mother ; of unemployment and squalor and privation and tuberculosis. The fears were crying again for a new healing.

When she first came to Old Lane she had sought a daytime job, so as to be free for Roddy in the evenings. And she had been fortunate to get a job in Walton, the draper's. Fortunate, because she had served no apprenticeship to the drapery business. But it happened that, just before her arrival in Brixton, Messrs. Hayward and Benny, the threepence-to-five-shilling stores, had opened a branch in Silver Street, and were draining the supply of "young lady assistants" in the Brixton labour market, and drawing not a few of the prettier girls from their counters in the drapers' shops. Walton's, a small draper's in Brixton Road, owned by a private trader, Mr. Denys Hendersen, advertised for a young lady assistant ; and Fay read the advertisement. The advertisement added, "Experience Essential," but Fay, trusting in her looks and her clothes, resolved to "have a shot at it." Her trust was justified. Mr. Hendersen hardly saw her before he decided to employ her, but he pretended that it was a great concession, and that she was lucky to have applied at a time when young ladies were scarce. And Fay pretended to agree, though discerning perfectly well that it was her looks, and not the state of the labour market, which had got her into Walton's. And this knowledge strengthened her confidence in her beauty, and, less happy result, her lingering, nagging worry lest she had marketed it too cheaply to Roddy.

So she became second sales in the department at Walton's carrying haberdashery, ribbons, and made lace ; and was fairly happy at first. Her pay, thirty shillings a week, plus one and a quarter per cent commission, was more than she had earned at the New Olympic ; and for a few months her long hours in the shop were made glamorous by an adoration for Miss Jones, the first hand, and her immediate superior. Miss Jones, a spinster of forty, was "most awfully sweet to her." She had, in fact, fallen in love with her. But now—now it was all different. The novelty was gone, and Miss Jones's love was gone, and some of Fay's earnings were gone too, because the business of the house had shrunk beneath the assaults of the chain stores, and she had been given no rise in twenty months, though she had sought it diligently with tears.

And Miss Jones was now a mortification rather than a glamour. She had taken to having good days and bad days ; and the bad days were tending to multiply at the expense of the good. Was it that her time had come ? So all the girls believed. On good days she called her "Fay" ; on bad days "Mrs. Stewart" ; and on very bad ones "Miss Stewart." And in exact ratio to the badness of the day was her quarrelling with Fay. Again and

again, on a very bad day, she would accuse her of taking the second customer when she herself had quite obviously finished with the first customer and was therefore entitled to serve the second and secure the commission. And as this was usually a lie, Fay would move along the counter and sulk. Yes, a pretty passion had gone the way of all good things; and Fay always addressed her superior now as "Miss Jones." Not for months, months, had she called her "Jonah."

And on top of Miss Jones (as you might say) there were now Miss Warner, the new chief assistant. Miss Warner was first sales in the fashion department, but when not occupied beslaving a customer, or when Mr. Hendersen was away, she walked the boards as manageress. And unfortunately she pictured herself as a woman of ideas, a woman who liked things done in a certain way and was determined to be obeyed, a woman of force and dignity. "There's a right way of doing things and a wrong way," she would proclaim twenty times a day, maddeningly. She would rebuke Fay for the smallest irregularity or untidiness. Fay even suspected that Miss Warner found a particular pleasure in these dignified stabs at *her*; and it is possible that she was right; for there was something in Fay's slim, soft, shapely body, and in her large, soft, night-blue eyes, that disturbed the sediment of sadism wherever such sediment lay. Not the least part of Miss Warner's offending was that she always spoke to Fay as if she was an ordinary girl instead of a married lady. She seemed to forget, this well-dressed manageress, that whatever her seniority in the shop, she was Fay's junior in the world outside.

In fine, Fay's dignity was smouldering, and she was alight with the idea of leaving Walton's and teaching Mr. Hendersen, Miss Jones, and Miss Warner a lesson. A little restive in the home, she was completely restive in the shop. And this afternoon—it was Wednesday, and her half-day—she had gone to the Labour Exchange and inquired about available jobs; and the gentleman in the Exchange, a Mr. Elliott, had scanned her rather strangely, pulling his chin and his nose, and when, under his catechism, she mentioned her experience at the Red Domes and the New Olympic, he had exclaimed, lifting his eyebrows, "Really?" and "That's rather curious," and "Yes, that's very odd," and at last, "Well, it so happens that I know just the job you might get, if you liked it;" and he had spoken to her of the Queen's Theatre, Clapham Rise, and of Mr. Annersley Muir, its manager. He had spoken enthusiastically. The famous old Queen's Theatre, he had said, after being in the doldrums for years, was now enjoying quite a boom. They had formed a repertory company there, a most jolly and attractive crowd, and each of them a first-class professional artist—let there be no mistake about that—and these

young people, by sheer enthusiasm, hard work, and ability, had built up a large and most loyal following. It had taken them two years to do it, but they'd done it, by jove. Done it, and no mistake. And now, according to Mr. Annersley Muir, who was an old friend of his—a very old pal, he might say—they were actually making money. And it was only yesterday that Mr. Muir had rung him up to ask him to find him a programme girl. Very curious that Fay should blow in within twenty-four hours. Well, there it was. And here was the address. If she went along about seven-thirty, she'd be sure to find Mr. Muir in the theatre. She'd best go to the stage door in Heath Street. And good luck to her, if she decided to go.

Fay's heart had taken fire at all he had said. As she accepted the slip of paper from his hand, and walked away, the longing to get this job had been like a flame. But Roddy! He would be most terribly hurt if she took it. He at the shop all day, she at the theatre all night! She gone from the house before he returned, and only his supper left waiting for him! Oh, she knew Roddy. With his quivering sensitiveness, he would feel a grievance here, which he would foment into a fury. He would lash her with his words, and himself with his thoughts, and finally storm out of the house in a huff. And for days he would be silent.

Doubt and hope, indecision and determination, had been her companions, as she hurried home, sometimes running, from the Labour Exchange.

§

Twenty to seven, and the clock ticking fast. She must decide soon. Or, rather, since only one decision was possible, she must dig up more and more food for its sustenance. She'd have all her days to herself. She'd have work in the evenings that interested her instead of boring her. She'd see a new play every week. And it seemed like destiny, almost, the manager ringing up the Labour Exchange a few hours before she went on. Seemed almost as if Fate *meant* her to go. She'd meet real actors, not shades on a screen. She'd love all the nice company, and they'd love her. She'd feel again the admiring glances of men as they came into the theatre instead of the hateful, hostile glances of most of the old biddies who came into the shop. Why, in the shop, sometimes, one never saw a man for days on end. She'd wear a nice uniform again. And perhaps—but no, this was a thought she would not form. Back with it into the limbo of the half-born. She was only going to the theatre because she wanted more interest in her life; not because—not because she wanted *that*. Not really.

"Then I am going, am I? Yes. I'm sure I'm right. All said and done, I'm sure I'm right. I can't stay like this for ever. I mean to say, I just *can't*."

She got up, put on her best frock, powdered her face and pencilled her lips, and, running down the dark staircase, cast an eye at Mrs. Houseman's closed door as might a guilty animal, and passed into the sunny street.

Fay's was a simple nature ; and simple natures, since their parts do not change, weave their lives again and again into the same pattern. Here is the same pattern that we saw five years ago : Fay in her best dress and paint (but with fears at her helm and prow) making a sortie from circumstances that confine her towards a theatre which is the setting of a vague, formless dream.

III

SHE saw the stage door, and fear slowed her steps. She was in a narrow side-street that ran parallel with the great highway which is Clapham Rise. It was as narrow and quiet as the highroad was broad and noisy. At its upper end it was also rather dark, and rather like a chasm between cliffs, because here the towering, flat, windowless back of the theatre confronted the high side-walls of a factory and a warehouse. The stage door, lonely in this windowless wall, was as humble and retiring as the canopied entrance on the Rise was pretentious and thrusting and showy. It was open; and she, not daring to enter at once, walked past it; but her eyes, cast over her shoulder, saw two men sitting on a bench against the colour-washed wall, their smoke rising from their pipes. Beyond them, squeezed into a corner, was a small office with a window, like the box office of a play booth. "Seven-twenty," said her watch. She faltered back to the door, and peeped in.

"Yes, miss?" asked the older of the two men. Grey-haired, grey-moustached, comfortably clothed, and smoking at ease, he seemed as much a fixture in that lobby as the wooden box office; and she did not doubt that he was the doorkeeper.

"I—er—could I see Mr. Muir?"

"Mr. Muir? He'll be in the front of the house somewhere—if he's arrived yet."

"He's here," offered the other man, a younger and bigger man in grey shirt-sleeves and blue pull-over—doubtless a stage hand.

"I seen him just now. He went up to his office."

"What were you wanting, miss?"

"I——" Fay didn't like the words, Labour Exchange—"I've got an introduction to him. It's about a job as programme girl."

"Oh, well, go through. D'you know your way?"

"I'm afraid I don't."

"Oh, well, I should go round to the front, miss. Someone'll show you the way."

"I'll show her, Bob," said the younger man, rising and knocking out his pipe on the brick wall. "I always was a gent. She don't want to fag all round to the front. Come along, miss. Excuse me going first said he like the gent he was. But it's a bit of a maze, if you don't know."

"Oh, thank you so much."

He was leading her down a wooden slope that looked as if floored with railway sleepers. It was the runway, and it brought them through wide wooden doors, chipped and cracked, into the large cold darkness of the stage. A dusty smell, blending paint, size, canvas, and cocoa butter, occupied the darkness.

"So there's a chah'nst of your being one of our programme girls?"

"Yes, I hope so."

"I hope so, too. Because you'll be the only one under fifty."

Fay flung up her eyes into the darkness of the grid, now immediately above her. So high it was that she could barely see the outlines of the roof above the hauled-up scenery, the hung battens, and the imprisoned dark.

"Mind your step now," warned the man. "There's a hell of a lot of junk about."

So there was. Flats leaned in stacks against the brick walls, or stood in position on the stage, with their braces outstretched to trip the unwary. All over the floor were hampers, weights, wires, floods, battens, and pieces of furniture as various as cottage settles, golden chairs, garden fences, and rustic seats. Perches for the spotlights stood like skeleton towers by the sides of the proscenium opening. Darkness shared the scene docks with mysterious scenery, properties and flats. It fascinated Fay: it was so different from the empty and dreary back-stage of the cinema; and her heart beat high with desire for the job, though it trembled when she remembered Roddy.

"Now down here, miss. It's a journey, isn't it?"

"It's very interesting."

"D'you think so?"

"Oh, yes. Terribly, *terribly*! I'm thrilled."

By the switchboard was a door, through which they went; then a dark, brief lobby; then another door—and lo, they had exchanged bareness for luxury, darkness for light, wooden boards for a soft carpet, and chill brick walls for salmon-pink panels framed in gold.

It was all a little abraded, certainly; there were cigarette burns in the carpet and on the walls; there were cracks and damp-stains on the paint; but it was a brave show, and a startlingly abrupt contrast. It was the same contrast as that between the stage door in the gloomy side-street and the canopied entrance on the Rise. It was the contrast between backstage and front of the house. In the theatre all is for the public.

"Upstairs now," explained her guide.

"I'm awfully glad you're with me. I'd never have found the way."

"Pleasure, I assure you, miss. Don't mention it."

He led her up a staircase of salmon-pink and gold, and round the gangway behind the seats of the grand circle. The great hollow of the auditorium was short of its midnight darkness only by the glimmer of a few gas lamps burning above the exit doors. All the electric bulbs were dead. The safety curtain, blank as a pessimist's outlook, filled the proscenium arch; and a thousand sightless seats, tier above tier, stared at it. Up from the depths beneath the circle's rim came voices, to which the distant recesses of this great cavern added loud-pedal resonance: two doormen, seated in the second row of the stalls, were talking and laughing in their last five minutes before they went to their doors.

And even Fay, who was no poet, felt the mystery of an old theatre when its life-blood, the public, has been drawn off, and it is an empty ghost, shut in with its darkness and its memories. Creeping draughts brush its raddled gilt and lift its velvet curtains; mice creep from its wainscots and cross its gold carpets; wood-work moves beneath its paint; and the crack echoes in the bell-hollow of the roof, while the darkness starts in its sleep at the sound.

"It's cold up here, isn't it?" she said, shivering her shoulders. Their footfalls sounded lonely and lost in the huge, dark emptiness.

"Just now it is, yes; but it'll be all right once the people are in. They heat it up all right. That's the best of having full houses: it don't matter what your heating system is like, and I don't mind telling you that ours is chronic. It works one day, and goes on strike the next; and in any case it only warms one side of the theatre. And the electric system's worse. It may set the place on fire any day said he warning her like a gent should. Good job that the people don't know that they may be frying at any moment, or they might not be so ready to come. But we're going to put it right now, I believe—now that we're showing a profit. Couldn't before. Just had to take a sporting chah'nst."

"The theatre's doing very well now, isn't it?"

"Not too bad. Not too bad. Why, I believe we're even going to redecorate the old shop, and Gawd knows it needs it. Don't believe it's had a coat of paint since it was opened by Senry Irving."

They were out of the circle now, and in a long tilted corridor of pink and gold. At the foot of the corridor they came to a door marked "Private," at which the man knocked.

"Come in, come in, come in." And again, "come in," called a voice, which was at once cheerful and resigned.

The man, opening the door, passed Fay in before him. Immediately the contrast again. Pink and gold walls had given place to a grimy wall-paper; and the soft gold carpet to an old red one, dusty and frayed and in holes. The furniture looked like an assortment of cast-offs from the stage. A heavy oak

writing-table, littered with papers, books, and wire baskets, filled the centre of the floor. A Recamier sofa stood against a wall. Louise Seize chairs mingled with Jacobean chairs and sagging Victorian easy-chairs and two tip-up seats, linked like Siamese twins. Old playbills hung all around the walls; and everywhere—on mantelpiece, window-sill, safe, and cupboard—were framed portraits autographed across their corners in flamboyant, theatrical hands. As the gentleman standing behind the writing-table did not look up, but only repeated, "Come in. Come in, bless you. Sit down somewhere; or, if you prefer, stand up," Fay was able to read some of these autographs. "To darling Annersley," she read. "For Annersley, one of the best." "To good old Annersley, a real pal." "Everlastingly, Annersley." "Yours, dear Annersley, till the curtain falls."

Such evidences of love sent her glance to Mr. Annersley Muir again. So that was darling Annersley. In the theatre all is for the public, and Mr. Muir, however disreputable his room, was dressed for the public. Rather tall and very slender, he wore a double-breasted dinner-jacket with velvet facings and a waspish waist, a double stock round his very high collar, a jewel or two on his long spidery fingers, and a monocle on the end of a black ribbon. He also wore side-straps on his lean cheeks and a deal of grease on his thin, dark hair. Evidently the Queen's Theatre was a background, not only for the talent of actors and actresses, but also for the personality of the manager. No doubt he played nightly before it, in vestibule, box office, and bar.

Still without looking up from his papers, which seemed to be vexing him, he asked, "Well, what is it, what is it, what is it?"

"Young lady to see you, sir. Come about a job as attendant."

"Oh." Now he did look up. And having looked up, he did not look down again. He had meant it to be a hurried look, but when it fell on Fay, it did not hurry. On the contrary, he fumbled for his monocle, forced it into his eye, and stared.

"O.K., Collins, old cock," he said. "Thank you. You can leave her with me. She'll be quite safe with me."

"Right, sir."

"Good-bye. Good-bye, and God bless you. Sorry you can't stop. Close the door quietly behind you. Now do sit down, Miss Miss, Miss——?"

"Mrs. Stewart," supplied Fay, sitting on the edge of one of the Jacobean chairs.

"What? Married? But you're only a baby."

"I'm twenty-two."

"Wurl. . . ." Mr. Muir pursed his lips. "That's only a baby. . . . yes. . . . 'Mrs. Stewart'!—I never heard such nonsense! Certainly twenty-two is only a baby—though they know a lot at that

age, sometimes. God save us, it's a baby *here*! All our old tabbies are about ninety. Hope you're fond of old people."

"Yes, I think so."

"That's right, dear. That's fine." He tossed his papers into a wire basket, opened his eye socket, and shed the monocle. He brushed his hands together, as if to remove the contamination of the papers—examined his finger-nails, polished them on his velvet cuff, and studied them again. "That's fine. Well, we're a happy family. A bit ancient, but good girls. How did you hear about this job, dear?"

"The gentleman at the Labour Exchange——"

"Oh!" He whistled. "Old Elliott and Fry sent you, did he? I see. I see. I see." And, pursing up his mouth, he nodded three times. "H'm. That explains a lot. The mystery is solved." And he sat down, and, feeling for the monocle, swung it round and round on its ribbon.

§

And while he swings his monocle, we will expand a little further the explanations of Mr. Elliott, of the Labour Exchange. The Queen's Theatre at Clapham had been a famous suburban house in the days of Irving, Bancroft, and Tree. But with the retreat of all wealth from the neighbourhood it had declined into a home of melodrama and pantomime; till at last, blockaded on all sides by the great new cinemas, it had languished and got ready to die. It would have been converted into a picture house, or pulled down and rebuilt as a Palais de Danse, had it not been for the swift action of a group of councillors and substantial citizens who considered themselves enthusiasts for the legitimate stage. These gentlemen formed themselves into a small company called Queen's Theatre (Repertory Productions) Limited, and got their company incorporated under the Industrial Provident Societies Act. The Board of Directors was thus, in strictness, a Committee of Management, but these good public-spirited men were not other-worldly nor void of pride, and they preferred to be known as directors. Almost their first decision, when assembled in committee, was to retain Mr. Annersley Muir. The Queen's, they said, without old Muir and his velvet facings, double stock, side-straps, and monocle, would be like an egg without its yolk—or, at least, like a sandwich without any mustard. He *was* the Queen's Theatre, they said. With this view Mr. Muir was in sympathy, but he was less satisfied with their decision to retain all the old programme girls, and to keep them in their black frocks and muslin aprons. Now that the old company had collapsed, and he sat as the sole

expert on this new committee of councillors, doctors, and other untheatrical persons, his private fancy was to be the Power Behind The Scenes, the Mayor of the Palace, managing his directors as a shepherd his sheep, and securing the execution of his own designs, which just now were many and napoleonic. Among them was a desire to get rid of the old black and white programme sellers and to sprinkle his gangways with flower-like girls in a gay uniform. "We want some legs about," he expounded to the directorate. "No one's going to pay a dime to look at any of our legs at the moment. And we want some really glad uniforms about. There's no kick to be got out of these black dresses. They raise depression rather than enthusiasm, *I* think. They're discouraging. They may be all right in a *table d'hôte* restaurant where the management don't want the people to eat too much at three bob a head, but they're no cop in a theatre where we've got to make the people swallow all the menu, even if some of it's tripe. We want something gladsome and gay-making."

But the directorate took the opposite view. In this matter they were stubborn, and behaved not as sheep but as mules. The chairman, an enormous and hearty doctor, declared that the girls had been there since the theatre opened in 1880, and he loved them all, and they loved him, and he'd miss them. Mr. Ottley agreed, propounding that the theatre was the theatre, and the cinema the cinema, and there was no comparison between them; that the wiser way was to differentiate the theatre as much as possible from the cinema and not to attempt to compete with it; that black and white attendants of a certain age were part of the tradition of the theatre; and that, personally, he found them a relief after the ravishing little cuties at the cinema. They left him free to attend to the performance. The other directors endorsed these observations, the Reverend Arthur Leyton, Non-conformist minister of Clapham Hill Chapel, dissenting on the last point, which he implied to the directorate he did not understand—but he was in a minority of one.

Mr. Muir bowed to their decision, as he must, but within the fastness of his mind he vowed to defeat it by a process of slow infiltration. One by one, as opportunity offered, he would engage fresh young lovelies; and when he had enough of them he would bring up again the question of the uniform. But none of the old attendants showed any symptoms of resigning, or, simpler still, of dying, and Mr. Muir learned to his dismay, and explained to his wife, that the measure of his difference from Napoleon was the measure of the softness of his heart. While aching for them to go, his heart enveloped them with kindness, and he treated them with the affection of a father—or of a son. At length, however, Mrs. Palgrave announced her retirement on the ground that

she must keep house for her boy who had just lost his wife ; and promptly Mr. Muir, leaping like a chamois, or a satyr, ran up his pink and gold stairs to his telephone, and rang up his friend, Mr. Elliott, at the Labour Exchange. "Look here, old son," he said. "One of my old dames has just slung her hook, and praise the Lord for that. I've been waiting for this for the best part of two years. Now, haven't you a really nice bit of stuff to send me? Something rather succulent. Look around, old boy, look around." Mr. Elliott promised to do all he could to help ; and within twenty-four hours Fay walked in and stood before him.

§

Mr. Muir tapped his monocle on his lip, and smiled with his eyes at Fay.

"Had any experience of this sort of thing before, dear?"

"I've been an usherette at a cinema."

"Gosh!" Mr. Muir's eyebrows went up. "Where?"

"At the Red Domes in Vauxhall."

"So, so?"

"Yes, I was there for two years, and then I was at the New Olympic in Walworth for a time."

"Gosh!" said Mr. Muir again ; and later, after scratching his cheek with the monocle, "Gee whiz."

"Yes. I only left there to get married."

Mr. Muir nodded several times, as if he perfectly understood.

"And did Mr. Elliott tell you the pay we give, dear?"

"No, he didn't mention that."

"Well, it's only sixteen bob a week, I'm afraid, but that's not bad for what's really a part-time job, is it, dear? Then of course there's a half dollar for the matinées, and a penny in the shilling commission on everything you sell, and you can make quite a lot out of that if you know the way to go about it—what with chocs, ices, programmes, and sometimes teas. Why, some of our girls have made as much as fifteen bob or so in a really good week, and if *they* can do it, my God, *you* can. Wait till you see 'em. But I can't promise you that you'll often make that, of course—still, you ought to be able to count on an extra seven or ten bob."

"I see. . . ."

"And we don't ask our girls to do any cleaning or anything. In most theatres, mind you, they expect you to pull the sheets over the seats before you hop it, but we're much too kind for that. You can usually reckon to be away ten minutes after the show."

"I see. . . ."

"And a week's holiday with pay. Oh yes, we're nice people."

And in enthusiasm at their niceness he swung the monocle till it looked like a Catherine wheel. "When could you come? Monday?"

Fay shook her head. "Monday week."

"All right. I don't mind. What's Monday week? God, we've waited long enough; we can wait till Monday week. And you've got a nice black dress, have you, dear? That's all our uniform at the moment: a black frock and an organdie apron. Damn silly; but I hope to change all that soon. As soon as I've got half a dozen little darl—half a dozen nice children like you, I'm going to put you into uniform. Something really chic, what? Chic. You can help me design it. Salmon and gold like the theatre, eh? Smoked salmon it is at the moment, rather, but I'm having it redecorated soon. Have it redecorated for you, shall I? Yes. Well, you want to turn up about seven-fifteen or so—half an hour before the doors open."

"Do you mean—does that mean that I'm to come?"

"Why, yes. Why, yes. What else? What else?"

"Oh, I'm *glad*!"

"What else are we talking about? I thought that was the idea. Certainly come. Certainly come. Isn't that what we've been gassing about for the last half-hour?"

"Oh, I—I didn't know. Oh, I *am* glad!" Indeed she was glad. Her eyes danced as she rose to go. And not only was she glad to have got this job, but also amazed and exhilarated at the ease of her conquest. Sweet, intoxicating, the flattery of it. Nearly always it was like this: she had but to apply for a job, and the manager, after one glance at her face and figure, gave it to her. Did it mean that she might have—that she had given herself too cheaply to—but have done with that thought! It hurt one's head so. It split one's head with a conflict, and stayed above the brows as an ache. Keep only that part of it which, by reminding one of one's value, strengthened one to face Roddy to-night. He must realize, he must realize that she could have done other things than come to him, and that though she wanted to be a good wife to him, she had her own life to live, and it awaited her, it awaited her, did she choose to knock at its door. "Good-bye, Mr. Muir. Thank you so much. I'm sure I shall like it awfully."

"Oh yes, you'll like us all right. Not a doubt about that. You'll love us—we're such an extraordinarily nice crowd—we few, we happy few, we band of brothers'—no one ever leaves us, once they come. That's the trouble. They stay on us and die on us. Like to see the show to-night?"

"Oh no, thank you very much. I want to get back and tell my husband."

"Husband! Husband at your age! Husband my foot! I shouldn't have thought you'd had time to look round yet. Still, run and get him his supper, and bring him along some other night, and then you'll be able to look at our girls and see what you think of them, in their natty black frocks and pinafores. Frost-bitten old hens, mostly, but good girls. I love 'em, you understand, love 'em, though I think it's time some of 'em enjoyed their well-earned repose. Yeah, good girls, but tough, definitely tough: I don't suppose one of 'em's been ill in fifty years, and they never die. . . . Well, good-bye then, my sweet. See you on Monday week."

IV

RODDY ran up his front-door steps, three at a time. Half-past seven. His mind pictured Fay in the room upstairs, and his body hungered to embrace her. This was always the best moment of the day. Slaving for ten hours in the shop was almost worth it, because fatigue made so sweet the prospect of rest, and absence made the heart grow fonder of Fay, and hunger for her was the best sauce.

He sprang up the stairs on tip-toe, and burst open their door, intending to snatch her, without a word, but with a smile, into his tight embrace.

But there was no one in the room. Only the supper things were on the table, waiting coldly. No ring was alight on the gas cooker, nor kettle steaming above it. Then she was out of the house certainly. Funny how often Life snubbed you like this, refusing to play its part in the little drama you had planned. Ah, she had propped up a note against the slop basin.

"Had to go out suddenly darling Tell you about it when I get back Rather interesting Back about eight So sorry my pet Shant be a second longer than I can help All my love always F."

The darling! "All my love always." The hunger in his body, disappointed of its immediate relief, worked its chemistry in his mind so that he saw her in a haze: without flaw and wholly desirable. His love pulsed faster in his heart. He walked to the window and looked out at the long ravine, where the sun was still bright on the house-backs. Between the tall housebacks, on the floor of the ravine, the column of trees marched to the base of the sky, which was less a sky to-night than a citron and amber glow. Down in his garden next door Mr. Hilton was hammering at his outhouse, while a dog played at his side. He had nailed a Venetian blind across its front, and was now patching a rotten wall with the lid of a packing case. Roddy smiled: no doubt Mr. Hilton was happy, with his nails in his mouth, and his hammer swinging smartly in his hand; but Roddy felt sorry for him because he was forty now and had no wife of twenty to love. In a few minutes Fay would be back, and in his arms; and he would be drinking delight from her fresh lips, and draining joy into his body from the hard pressure against him of her breast and loins and limbs.

Funny, though, funny, the stabs of pain she could give him sometimes. Hell, they were like—like *hell*. No exaggeration: they were the most awful pains he had ever known in his life. What a fool he was! Why did he let them assault him at times, and get him down, and possess him, and rack him, when, as all that was sensible in him knew, he was one of the luckiest people in the world?

He could not understand.

Roddy could not understand because the reason lay far below the sight of his untutored mind. It was this: the whole of one need in his nature had focused on Fay, and intermittently it found complete fulfilment in her; but to find complete fulfilment is to find danger, because it is to breathe the air of heaven while still on the earth, and the price of knowing heaven is always the risk of hell. The air of heaven is evanescent down here, and the pain of its loss is the breath of hell. Because Fay was his only fulfilment, his only compensation, justification, and success, any momentary loss of her was a moment worse than death. Let her lose her beauty when she was tired, let her mouth sag and her eyes go dull, so that for a moment she was desirable no more, and he was forced to cry, "Oh, why can't you look cheerful? Do buck up, for God's sake. And for God's sake, don't stoop. And need you go about as untidy as that?" Let her reveal some defect in her character, some selfishness or hardness, and it stabbed him straight to the heart, and turned his heart into a blob of sickness. So deep the wound, when his satisfaction in her was thus temporarily withdrawn, that it gave him the same pain, only much sharper, as when his other need was wounded, and he had earned ridicule instead of applause. "Oh, I only want to die," something cried in him automatically. "I only want to die."

These momentary failings of his love for her were never more than transient, partly because he could not endure them, and had to climb out of them, and partly because the love could be inflated again at a touch—by the admiration of other men, or by a sudden, unreasonable doubt of her, or by a recalling of the ecstasies he had enjoyed upon her, or by a maddening picture of her giving these ecstasies to another man. "Oh God, I should just die if she did that. And I'd want it to be annihilation. I couldn't live in another world with the thought of *that*." He needed her so much that his love was frightened; it was afraid of itself and of her. It wanted her to be always beautiful and good, so that it need not sink and faint; and it wanted her away from the eyes of other men, so that it need not fear. At work behind his counter, he liked to think of her in her draper's shop, where no men came. And in the evenings he wanted to be at her side all the time—provided she looked beautiful. And provided she was centred on him. Let

her dilate upon some other boy who had loved her, or let her show the smallest discontent with her married life, and he went very quiet. And in his quiet he was jealous of her discontent and of her dreams. And strange, strange, the pleasure he got from bruising her with silence. Or from whipping her with words. The mingled misery and exultation! It was a bitter, sparkling drink, to which, like a weak-willed addict, he was always quick to return, though its aftermath was sickness and headache and remorse.

He could not understand.

Ah, there she was! This was she. Yes, the door opened, and she entered, playing a bright smile over her face.

"Good evening, Mrs. Stewart."

"Evening, Mr. Stewart. Have you been waiting long? So sorry, my loveliest."

He took her in his arms and kissed her—kissed her lips, hair, brow, and eyes. Her kisses were willing, but—were they not a little remote, as if her thoughts were far away? His sensitiveness began to throb, and his pride to rise—but he controlled both.

"Glad to see me?" he asked.

"Of course. Aren't I always?"

"That's right. I like to be welcomed. And I like to hear you say it. Where've you been?"

"I'll tell you in a jiffy." She broke from him gently. "It's a most exciting business, but let's get supper first, shall we?"

"Oh no, I want to know now. You've got me excited."

"O.K., sweet." Going to the door, she took down her green overall and put it on, tying it about her waist, as she walked to the gas stove. Her back was towards him. "Where are the matches? Now, where on earth did I put the matches? Ah, here they are."

"Well, what is it, love?"

"Oh, I do hope you'll understand, darling." Having lit the ring under the kettle, she turned towards him, and said with an acted merriment, "I've changed my job!"

"What?"

"I'm changing my job on Monday week."

"Here! I say! You never told me anything about this." Instantly his wounds began to ache.

"But I didn't know myself till this evening, silly."

"Yes, but, dammit, you might have discussed it with me. Am I nothing? Aren't I your husband?"

"To tell the honest truth, I hadn't made up my mind till this afternoon. And it all happened quick as lightning. I bounced into the Labour Exchange, heard of this job, and ran off to see about it straightaway. And I was given it at once. That's what's so comic."

Roddy picked up a plate and beat its edge on the table. "Well what is the job?"

"It's a job at the Clapham Theatre."

"The Clapham Theatre! What as?"

"An attendant, of course. Don't look so pale. A programme girl. What else?"

"Programme girl!" His heart was sinking—sinking and dying. "But that's an evening job."

"Oh yes, of course, but——"

"But, Fay—Hell, no! No, I'm not falling for that. Thank you, no. I want my missus at home in the evenings, same as anyone else. Do you mean to say——"

"Oh, I've thought all that out, Roddy. I didn't decide at once. Listen: I shall be free all day, and be able to keep the place much nicer for you. Mondays you'll be able to come to the show, because I shall get free passes. Thursdays we'll be able to have together, which we've never had before. And Fridays and Saturdays you're never home till after nine——"

"Rats! Piffle! That's all ——. What it amounts to is that I'm to mooch about the streets every night while my wife is at a theatre. No, thank you! You can wash the idea out, thank you very much."

Her lips set. "I'm not going to. I've accepted the job. It'll suit me just right."

The pain, the pain again; the awful pain! "I see." Stupidly, he tossed the plate along the table, where it struck a cup and cracked it. "Hurray! That's smashed. And who cares? Who cares?"

"Oh, don't be ridiculous, Roddy. So silly to behave like that."

"Silly! Silly! Ha!"

"Yes, of course it is."

"Silly, my God in Heaven! Silly to be just a trifle upset because my wife doesn't care a bloody damn about me."

"Please don't swear at me. I'm not used to it. All the other programme girls are married, as it happens—all but one."

"I don't care if they got twenty husbands. There's husbands and husbands, and quite a lot are glad to see the backs of their wives. I'm not like that—at least I wasn't. I don't know where I am now. Do you think it pleases me to think that you don't consider my advice worth asking——"

"I just went the minute I heard of the place, for fear someone else might get it. It's only natural—if you'd use your sense."

Dramatically Roddy walked to the mirror over the mantelpiece. "Do I look a perfect fool? Can't see that I do. Isn't it perfectly obvious that the fact that you can take the bloody job means that you don't care about me like you did——"

"It means nothing of the sort."

"Oh yes, it does!"

"Don't shout at me. What'll Mrs. Houseman think?"

"I don't care what she thinks. Fat and puffing old windbag. I shall shout if I like. This is my room, and I pay for it. I shall shout if I like." His fists clenched, and his lower teeth came beyond his lip. He felt a sudden desire to take her by the shoulders and shake her, and then slap her cheek; and his body quickened at the thought. He longed to do it, as he longed to kiss her. But he remembered Bill Every. No, no one should liken him to Bill Every. Not after he'd made such a reputation for kindness and gentlemanliness. He must thrash her with words—words only. "I'm in my own home, aren't I?—if you can call it a home. Home, sweet home. God bless our home, so full of love. So lovely to come home to every night, after the long day's toil is done." And he began to sing. "There are hands that will welcome me in, There are lips I am burning to kiss, There are two eyes that shine, Just because they are mine—'—Oh, God, oh God! But, as you say, it's comic."

"Please remember there are people all around us. Please remember the Ashbys on the other side of the wall."

"They're out. They're out, as a matter of fact. I heard 'em go out while I was kicking my heels here, and you were messing about at your theatre. But I shouldn't care if they were twenty times in. Do you suppose I mind about the Ashbys when my home is falling to pieces? Let 'em hear."

"Oh well, if you're going to talk like that—if you won't be sensible. . . . Roddy, dear, do be sensible. Do try to understand I didn't mean to——"

"Oh, I'm being sensible all right. Sensible enough to see just exactly what this means. It means that you don't care two hoots about me. Merely that. Nothing much. Nothing to worry about. Merely the end of all I ever hoped for"—but, steady: the tears were near. He turned his face towards the window. "It's not very important. I'm pretty sure I can find someone else to love me."

"I think you're being ridiculous."

"I made a bloomer; that's all. Backed the wrong horse. Well, one can try again."

"Just silly nonsense you're talking. I got no patience with you when you talk like that."

He swung round with fists clenched again. "Oh you wretched little idiot! Shut up! Shut *up*, can't you? If you'd any sense at all, you'd see the very fact that it seems nothing to you, and all the world to me, shows that we're miles, miles, miles apart——"

"Sh! Someone's listening!"

She went to the door and turned her ear to it—and he felt thwarted, his oration guillotined. This maddening refusal of Life to provide the apt setting for your drama. Silence . . . and Fay walked back to the stove. "I think Mrs. Houseman was on the stairs, listening. Do talk quiet, if you must go on like this. I'm sure she'd come out to listen. She does, sometimes. I caught her at it the other day. I'd come up the stairs, and was feeling in my bag for the key of the door, which I'd locked, when I heard her open her door and come to the foot of the stairs and listen."

"She can listen till her head blows off f'r'all I care. I was saying that every word you utter proves we're miles apart."

"Some wives'd get thanks for going off to earn money after slaving all day."

"There you are! There you are! Everything you say shows the same thing. People who love each other don't talk about thanks. They want to serve each other, like; as Uncle Vic said at our wedding. Ha, he little knew! Well, it's nice to know where we stand."

Fay put her fingers on his arm, and refused to be rebuffed when he shook them off. "Now, Roddy darling, do be—do try to see it from my point of view. I been doing two jobs, haven't I? Cleaning and cooking here, and working full time at the shop. And sometimes I been tired out. I really have. Well, this is a half-time job, and nearly as much money. I shall be able to keep all this, and cook and everything, ever so much nicer."

But Roddy didn't want his grievance lessened. He wanted to stay on the windy and stimulating heights of wrath.

"Eyewash! If you can't see what you've done, you can't, that's all. It all shows the same thing. I'm going out. If I've got to spend the evenings in future mooching about alone, I may as well get used to it."

"But what about supper?"

"Supper be damned! Who wants supper when the world's at an end for him? It's not *supper* I want. Isn't that just like you: 'supper,' when my heart's breaking? Have your supper alone, and enjoy it, since you seem to prefer your own company to mine. Oh, cry if you like. I don't stay where I'm not wanted." As he loafed to the door, he turned towards her. "And I don't mind telling you I'm quite ready to clear out for good and all, as soon as I'm no longer wanted. I'll find someone else to love me."

And, snatching his cap from the knob of the bed, he went from the room down the stairs, whistling. Mrs. Houseman's door closed quickly and quietly just as he turned the corner on the half-landing, but what did that matter? So little did he care for old Ma Houseman that he hummed as he slammed her front door for her, and, without looking back, ran down her steps.

§

He drifted along Old Lane and into the shopping district—into Atlantic Road, Electric Avenue, and Brixton Road—simply because there were lights here, and people. All the shops were shut now, but most of their windows were tanks of light which flooded the dusk and washed the pavements below them. People straggled across the pools of light, happily gossiping, or they stood in the flood from the windows, looking at the costumes, the hats, the furniture, or the jewellery. Many were lovers, the girl's arm hooked in the man's, or his arm around her waist; and it was rare for such a couple to pass a furniture shop without pausing to look in. High above the great stores, and brightening as the sky darkened, shone the star upon the cupola of the Empress Theatre, like a pantomime star in a back-cloth. Trams grated and jangled between the patrolling crowds; buses droned and rattled; cars shot hooting on their sinuous courses; and trains, newly lighted, streamed across the intersecting viaducts, one train higher than the other, and each flying its dreamy people across the night.

And Roddy, as he rambled on, not without pleasure in his despair, pondered the abiding loneliness of every soul that moves among its hurrying neighbours, beneath unheeding stars. Monotonously he repeated, "She doesn't feel what I do for her. She can't. She can't. She couldn't do that if she did—if she wanted me or missed me. And if she doesn't, I only want to die."

At the corner of Silver Street a woman, standing within a shop's embrasure, like a sentry in his box, both hands holding her vanity bag over her stomach, winked at him and mumbled, "Lonely, darling?"

"What?" She had startled him. "Oh no. . . . No, thanks very much." And he walked on, hearing a low laugh behind him.

But faintly, faintly through the thick walls of his despair, that woman's word had played upon something in him. It had reached and stirred again the lees of that desire for Fay which, two hours earlier, had been such a heady wine. The lees rose and shaped themselves into a new idea—a lust to forgive Fay, to grasp her small, supple body in pardoning arms, to see her crying on his shoulder, to wipe her eyes with his own handkerchief, and to smooth back her hair and love her. To bathe with her in a shared emotion, as in warm healing waters.

Such a desire cannot sink; it must swell; and soon it was driving him back—back through the meandering and purposeless people, for whom he now felt sorry, back past the lighted shops, which for the moment could strike at him no more, back into the

long, curving dyke of Old Lane, deep and grey between its tall houses, which now seemed a road to sweetness and delight. Up the white steps, three at a time, over the threshold, up the dark stairs on soundless feet, to the room door with heart distending—

But the room was empty. She was not there. Once again Life had declined, sardonically, to meet him half way. Of all places she must be in the room on the half landing, where he had seen a light behind the coloured-glass panes of its door as he rushed up the stairs. Nothing to do but wait. He stood there, looking at the supper table, whose dishes and plates told him that she had eaten hardly anything. Well, that was something. He was glad of that. He was glad she'd been unhappy too. Ah, here she came—and, yes, this time Life had provided just a little stuff for his drama, in that she had been crying to herself down there and now turned her head from him and walked towards the sink.

But he went up behind her, swung her with a whimsical violence into his clutch, and forced up her chin so that she must look at him. And, having kissed her, he said, "I'm sure it's all right, my darling, if you say it is."

"Oh, Roddy . . . I wish we didn't quarrel . . . I *will* try to make you happy. I promise I will. I want to so. You don't believe it, I know, but I *do*. I do, frightfully. Ever so."

And she kissed him passionately, and smiled up into his face—though, behind her kisses, behind her smiles, behind her thoughts even, like a frightening stranger, knocked the unadmitted thought that he had been right: she *was* going to the theatre with her vague, formless hope . . .

V

LAMBETH WALK is like a long groove, filled with shouting and clatter and clobber, among the cottages that crowd by the river. It runs obliquely but straight—straight as a diagonal line that cancels a written page; and if you like to be fanciful, you can think of it as a straight line cancelling for ever the pleasant garden which was once here, and which was known as Lambeth Wells. At Lambeth Wells, in the days when South London was little more than a Dutch plain with windmills, the visitors from over the river, and the visitors from the houses gathering on the fields, drank waters, rolled skittles, heard music, listened to scholarly lectures, and often, on gala nights, danced till two in the morning. And now Lambeth Walk has quashed it: quashed it beneath clatter and clobber and voices.

Lambeth Walk is the liveliest street market to be found near the river; and in its shops or at its stalls you can buy everything necessary for life, from contraceptives that don't work to coffins and wreaths and gravestones. It is the Caterer for the side-street people. It caters alike for the poor, the prospering, and the destitute. It caters for the healthy, the diseased, the hungry, the thirsty, the ragged, the dressy, and, most noticeably, for those who would dance and sing. Among the shops that front its narrow pavements you will find cobblers, herbalists, old clothes dealers, costumiers, rag and bone merchants, fish friers, birth control specialists (with, fittingly enough, a perambulator and toy shop next door), radio specialists, Charley's Famous Dining Rooms, London's Supreme Bakers, Narcantoni's Café, and Hodson and Cooper's, the Celebrated South London Stores. On its barrows which line the gutters and almost fill the narrow macadam you can see nearly everything that is grown or produced on our spinning earth, from pea-nuts and flowers to fur coats and rings. And it is fitting again, strangely fitting, that this long clamorous street, parable of a man's walk through life, should open at one end with a tiny, crazy little shop, inherited from the past and already sunk beneath the pavement level; should burst quickly into a noontide uproar of chaffering and laughter and jostle; should grow quieter as you approach the further end; and should close at last (as, upon my oath, it does) in a night-shelter for the homeless which is called "The Greater World."

And here amid the voices, in Hodson and Cooper's store, all the morning after the quarrel, Roddy was asking himself, "How could she have loved me and done that?" He was serving that day behind the grocery counter, because the first grocery hand was on holiday; and he mixed the question with his currants, loose tea, and icing sugar; he read it between the lines of the orders he was taking down; he drew it from the string box and tied it up with his packages; and he waited with it by the despatch counter, while the delivery boy tarried.

"I'm not the first thing in her life; that's plain. I'd better get that into my head. She's not wrapped up in me—not by a long chalk. She's hankering after a lot more than I can give her. I'm now a useful old donkey-engine to keep the home going, and not so much more. . . . Here you are, Jack. Get these orders away."

The shop was more crowded than usual, because it was Thursday and early closing day. People poured in and out through the doors: old women with shopping bags; young wives with babies in their arms; sore-faced children sent for penn'orths of such and such; and occasionally a merry-eyed coster from his stall, to do a deal for his old woman. The assistants in their white jackets shifted from customer to customer; and the manager in his grey jacket either walked the floor or ran to fill a breach in the service. Outside in the sunlight the costers yelled, and the crowds trailed by, and the children shouted, and a policeman sauntered along, on his quiet watch of the street market—while Roddy felt as self-centred and solitary as if he were the only human being in the world. His white coat might have wrapped a nomad in the desert. He gave his usual smile to the customers who liked him and came to him; and behind his smiling he was teasing his worry into a ferment.

At that theatre—supposing the men took liberties with her. She was so beautiful at times (he could almost wish she were less so) and the men were there in hundreds, and opportunity waited everywhere. Think of the actors. Actors were notoriously loose. Think of the fellows in the audience trying to make dates with her. Think of some usher or linkman caressing her in the long, empty hours between the intervals. Oh, he felt mad as he pictured it. Mad and murderous.

His query and worry were like a lamp in his head; and gradually, as the cluttered hours went by, the lamp began to throw light. He began to see things. He must, *must* make a success of his marriage, which had been his only triumph in life. What was he to do? He must ask less and *give* more: more understanding, more patience, more imagination, more forgiveness. What was it old Uncle Vic had said: "Go into it rather to give than to get, and you'll get all." Oh, was he for the first time really *seeing*

this? Really experiencing it and possessing it? Yes, and it was flattering to feel that he had taken a step forward into vision, and was no longer as other men. Poor kid, she hadn't, she just hadn't, had much of a time: cooking and cleaning in the morning, working in her shop all day, and then cooking and cleaning again. Of course she'd been lonely and dull. Of course she longed for some colour and fun. And if he loved her, he must understand this and help her. Golly, was he seeing something? He began to feel happier.

He worked on this new resolve for the rest of the morning, like a man working on a rope-ladder that would enable him to break prison. The work was as absorbing as the work of a child on a jigsaw puzzle. And as the clock's hand turned upwards towards one o'clock he completed the work. He had woven a firm purpose of amendment. His wound was healed (for a time) and he was happy and sanguine again.

§

Fay, miles away on Clapham Rise, moved amid very different voices. She moved happily, airily, skipingly, among the people at the theatre, because for the present, at any rate, she loved them all, whether those in the dark, bare warren behind the proscenium arch or those in the high, gilded cavern before it. The Queen's was a house of happy and enthusiastic people. It was alight with easy goodwill; and young Graham Hayes, the Producer for The Queen's Players, was the bright nucleus of the flame. He had infected his whole company with his high spirits, geniality, and self-effacing service; and his company had infected the whole staff, both back-stage and front-of-the-house; and producer, company and staff together had infected the audience. The audience came each week like a congregation of the faithful to its chapel. Graham might play (and usually did) the smallest parts in the week's drama, but always, on his first appearance, they gave him the same ovation as they gave to Monty Carrell, the handsome young leading man, or to Adela Benson, the leading lady and less young, or, for that matter, to every other member of the cast. Everybody at the Queen's, with only occasional lapses, smiled benevolence at everybody else. Graham, in his dirty grey flannel trousers and ragged sports coat, never swept past Fay without saying, "Hallo, my precious! Happy, I hope?" or "Evening, darling. Sorry I can't stop to discuss your love-life with you. Some other time, perhaps." And Monty Carrell had no other name for her but "Sweetheart," and his most frequent greeting was, "Bless you, sweetheart. When do we coquet together? What? Not at

all? But, sweetheart, no bananas? No bananas for a famishing man? Well, never mind. Let brotherly love continue." And Adela Benson always called her "My dear," or "Fay ducks" and was quick to tell her that she looked "adorable," or "exotic," or like something out of Hans Andersen or Botticelli or the Holy Bible, she wasn't sure which—she was inclined to think it was Jairus's daughter, or Cleopatra as a child, but Cleopatra wasn't in the Holy Bible, was she? The other programme girls, all over forty, were too old or too settled in life to be jealous of her, though little Mrs. Stewart was the one vivid figure among them. Moreover, her shyness gave her an appearance of modesty, to which her natural affectionateness added charm; and they were disposed to agree, most of them, that she was a "really sweet kid."

Yes, the Queen's, on Clapham Rise, dusty and tarnished old theatre, housed the happiest working hours that Fay had ever known, or was to know. After Walton's, the draper's, after the Thames Swan Laundry (though this was almost forgotten), after the mechanical and impersonal cinemas, it was a hearty, tawdry paradise. In her black dress and muslin apron she floated about the stalls one week, the grand circle the next, and the second circle the week after that; and she came to know the audience as a sidesman his congregation. The men, she observed, were only too glad to exchange a word and a smile with her, but they were never impertinent like the louts and larrikins at the cinema. The women stared at her much, and spoke to one another about her; and this was pleasing. Every Monday, since this was a slack night, she sat and watched the week's new play, and usually it was a good play, exceedingly well acted by this devoted young company, though they had only begun to rehearse it on the Tuesday before. On other nights, once the house lights were down and the play begun, she sat in the lighted lobby, and got on with her knitting and her novel, till the Interval should summon her again. No monotony, no footsoreness, no bodily aches, as in the dark cinemas. She quickly learned that Mr. Annersley Muir, in his flamboyance, had exaggerated the commission she could earn, but she made fair money in the best weeks. After the second interval she would prance up the pink and gold stairs to Mr. Muir's office, and pay in her takings, and then skip down again, feeling that the night's work was nearly done. Only the last act to run, only the last curtain to fall, and she would be free. Perhaps Roddy would be waiting for her by the stage door.

And because she was happy in her work, she was merry and bright-eyed in her leisure. She would snatch Roddy's arm, press it, and walk, laughing and hopping, at his side.

§

And so Roddy was able to believe that the menace, as so often in life, was much less than he had feared. At first he had watched her anxiously. He had scanned her face, weighed her words, and glanced at the covers of her letters. He had loitered by the stage door in the narrow side street, to see what happened when she came out. But nothing happened. No shadow lurked near the door, nor against the warehouse wall on the opposite side of the road. Only Fay appeared in the box of light, said good night to the door-keeper, and stepped into the street; and her eyes brightened as she saw him there, and she put her arm into his. And since he saw nothing, there could be nothing to see, for he knew that jealousy would give him eyes for the least symptom of an intrigue.

He got used to the new order. He came less often to the stage door. He gave less time to doubt and speculation. Instead, his evenings being lonely, he began to play again with the idea of doing something in the world and making his name a noise among men. He did not write stories as before, because he was too tired after ten hours behind a counter, and because it had long ago broken upon him, with a flash of revelation, that it was one thing to want to write, and another thing to have anything to say, and that he must read, read, read, if he was to catch up with the chaps who'd gone on with their education after they were fourteen. And now this necessity to read was a good excuse for dodging the toil of composition. One could read lolling in an easy chair and resting one's shop-weary back and feet. So far he had done no systematic study because he had been too busy dallying with Fay, but now he attempted it. From the Public Library at Brixton Crossways he got books on philosophy, science, and art. But with no one to guide him, no one to show him the way up the mountains, he made the mistake of climbing at once up the steepest slopes. They were ponderous books that he brought from the Library, ponderous to carry and ponderous to read. Their pages were like blows between the eyes, so little could he understand them. His brow ached with the blows. The words, the names, the allusions—most of them he had never met before, and each was a rap or a buffet that caused him to sigh and fidget in his easy chair.

He battled on for a week or two with twisted brain and wooden brow; but at length the discouragement was complete. Useless. The task was beyond him. He knew hardly anything, and it was too late now to make good the lack. He shut the large book with a snap; and the snap was a symbol. He had surrendered.

He had counted himself out. "No, I reckon I mighta done something if I'd had a chance, but I guess I'm too far behind now, and shall never have the spare time to catch up. And, anyhow, I guess I must admit that my brain was never the equal of these chaps' brains, who write books like these."

And it was extraordinary the sudden relief that came from admitting that he was merely ordinary, and need strain no more to be great. His whole nature seemed to sink to rest, like a whipped-up lake when the wind falls. He suddenly felt serene, happy, and full of released energy. He jumped up, went out into a gracious night, and walked with a vigorous step up Acre Lane, which led to Clapham Rise, the Queen's Theatre, and Fay.

VI

AND the sum of things stayed thus until Uncle Vic, with a wink, introduced a new factor in the form of a whispered idea.

Uncle Vic was pleased when Roddy and Fay came to live at Mrs. Houseman's in Old Lane. Ever on the prowl for someone to play with, he would put on his broad-brimmed grey hat when supper was done, light up his pipe, thrust his cane under his arm, and stroll with his high-breasted, pompous stride down Brixton Hill on a visit to "my young people." The Lane watched him go by with gapes and smiles and comments; and he was a source of credit to the young couple at Mrs. Houseman's.

On Mrs. Houseman he made an excellent impression: he was so gracefully gallant to her when she peeped from her door to learn who had stepped thus heavily into her hall. "Please do not trouble, Madam. Put yourself to no inconvenience for me. I should know my way up your stairs by this time. Now go you back to your good man and his supper, if he's at home; and God bless you, God bless you . . ." So he would address her on one evening; and on another, dismissing her with a wave of his hand: "Go home, madam, go home. I desire to incommode nobody with my coming and going: good-bye, good-bye, dear lady; I will go my way alone . . ." And on another, smiling benignantly: "They are at home? Good. Then I'll go up to them just for a moment, just for a moment. May I say that I'm sure they must be very happy in your most comfortable house. It is a source of no small satisfaction to my dear wife and myself to think that they are in your care, for they are but young, you'll admit, and the boy has always been particularly dear to us. Now do you go back to your room and rest, dear lady, for I'm sure you must be tired after the labours of the day; and I'll negotiate these stairs at my own *tempo*. And what a beautiful day it has been."

To the young people, as he opened their door, he always offered an excuse for coming and an assurance that he wouldn't stay long; because in his heart he was nervous lest they should be vexed by his visit, and wish him away. To guard against this

he would come carrying a little gift for Fay: a bunch of flowers from his garden, or a box of her favourite sweet, or a feminine journal which he had shoplifted from his daughter's room. Or he would toss a library book on to the table and say, "I'm not stopping, but I just thought Roddy ought to read this book. It'll interest him, I feel. No, I mustn't stay. I'm sure you don't want an old man breaking in upon your idyll. God forbid that I should be a smoke in your nostrils. Old men are a nuisance, always. Horrible old creatures, sitting in the best chairs, and leaking loquacity by the hour. Lucky if they don't drip from every orifice too. No, youth to youth. Well, only for a few minutes then, only for a very few minutes." And then, justified, he would sink into an easy chair and stay for the best part of the evening, chatting brilliantly and studding his talk with compliments to their "artistic little home" and its "fair mistress."

He need not have feared for his welcome, because Fay really loved him. He was so extraordinarily sweet to her, she said: *such* an old darling. Directly he appeared and apologized, she would cry, "Nonsense, Uncle darling," and bunch up the cushion and turn a chair towards him, declaring that they now regarded this as Uncle Vic's chair and sacred to him. How could she do other than love him when he so obviously admired her, and so obviously enjoyed the avuncular kiss and pat? His kiss and pat were reverent, the one on her cheek (sometimes on both cheeks), and the other on her shoulder; but he obviously enjoyed them. "It's no use concealing it, Roddy," he would announce, dropping into the chair. "I unashamedly love your wife, but in a purely avuncular way, of course—a purely avuncular way. I'm very proud of my little niece."

But now, when he peeped into the room of an evening, Fay was no longer there. Only Roddy was there, reading alone, and perhaps scribbling notes on a pad; and Uncle Vic, remembering that the boy had an ambition to write, would say, "Now, don't let me disturb the divine afflatus. Don't let me interrupt the author at his work. I know only too well what it is to be in the throes of composition, and have some footling idiot burst into the room, just as Inspiration is visiting you, so that she is destroyed and dispersed for ever, and your work is ruined for the rest of the day. It took me years to teach your mother—I mean your auntie—to show a little mercy. No one thinks of disturbing a dentist or a doctor in his consulting room, but anyone will butt in on an artist, at any moment of the day, and call it affectation if he groans a little in his anguish and despair. Let it not be said that I ever sinned in such a way, or deliberately disturbed a brother artist when the afflatus was upon him." Having said

which, he lowered himself into his chair, filled his pipe, and prepared for a long stay.

But Roddy, as lonely as he, was usually quite relieved and pleased to have him there; and inevitably, since his principal problem was a sex problem, which ached to be shared with someone, the evening came when he was pouring it on to his uncle's lap and asking his opinion and advice.

Nothing could have interested Uncle Vic more. Never did he spend a better evening. He stared as he listened; he nodded often, thinking his own thoughts, and picturing his own pictures; he pulled strongly at his pipe, till the clouds about him were like his thoughts made visible. Or, let us say, like a smoke-screen for his thoughts, some of which were better screened.

"H'm . . ." he nodded. "I understand. I understand perfectly . . . Ah yes . . . Yes . . . Yes, they can be difficult little fillies, these young wives, bless their hearts. Sometimes you get one who has no interest in the world apart from her man, but they're rare, I'm afraid—very rare. It must be pleasant when you've got one like that—very pleasant indeed—wonderful to be all in all to someone . . ." mused Uncle Vic. "I always wanted to be all in all to someone. Still, one can always buy a dog . . . That's the real reason why so many men go about with dogs . . . I wish I had one . . . However . . . But if they're not quite like that, Roddy, if their hubby isn't exactly the be-all and end-all of their pretty little existences, if they're restless and dissatisfied and pouting, there's only one thing to do."

"And what's that?" Roddy was now the one to stare.

"Give 'em a real interest, my boy. Give 'em something to occupy their minds. Give 'em something to keep their thoughts at home."

"Yes, but what?"

"I should have thought that was obvious. Come, come, Roddy."

"It's not obvious to me, I'm afraid. What is it?"

Uncle Vic smiled mysteriously as he looked into his pipe bowl which he was now refilling, but did not answer.

"What is it, Uncle?"

"Put a child into their arms, of course. And put it there quick." He lit his pipe.

"Oh . . . I see . . ." And now Roddy nodded thoughtfully.

"Yes, that's the secret. Give 'em a child, and you've got 'em."

Uncle Vic took his pipe from his mouth, pressed down the tobacco, which was too loosely packed, and lit the pipe again.

He had said his word, in part because he believed it, in part because he thought it sounded wise, and mainly because old men like to speak of such matters when they have a pretty woman in mind.

"But Fay says she doesn't want any kids as yet—not till she's had some fun. In fact, she's terrified of the idea. She thinks it'll spoil her looks. Once we thought one was coming, and she got into an awful state about it."

"Pooh! They often behave like that. But the first time their own infant puts its hand on their breast, they're done for. They capitulate at once. Your fair lady's a little cold, is she?"

"How do you mean?"

Uncle Vic explained what he meant. He explained in some detail, because the explanation was enjoyable.

And Roddy, when the explanation was finished, shook his head and said, "Oh no. No. I don't think one could say that of Fay. No, rather not."

"Well, then I don't believe she knows what she does want." And he tapped the pipe on the fender and applied a third match: the pipe, apparently, was behaving no better than a cold wife. "Extraordinary creatures, women. Superficially they can be as different as—what shall we say?—as iced water and hot rum punch. But fundamentally they're as alike as"—Uncle Vic shrugged, and spread his large palms, while he searched for a simile—"well, as one bottle of claret is to another. And as a fine full-bodied claret too, if you once stir 'em up properly. Of course there may be some small difference of vintage; and, my God, there's such a thing as bottle age—yes, my God, there's certainly such a thing as that—'Ripeness is all'—but basically, my boy, *basically*, they're all the same . . . all the same . . . all the same. Marvellous creatures. I confess I've been fascinated by them all my life. Life would be very dull without them—very. A stroke of genius on *le bon Dieu's* part to split the world into sexes, and so destroy all possibility of monotony and peace. It almost makes me believe in Him. As a rule, my boy, the passionate ones are maternal from the start, while the chilly ones declare that they've no maternal instincts at all; and, bless you, there's no real difference between either of them. Any man who knows his business can awake the passion in any of 'em, and any baby, as I say, can light the maternal fire with one touch of its lips on their breasts. Bless 'em all, I love 'em."

Roddy, leaning forward in his chair, gazed at the fender. "I don't see how we could afford a child. Fay wouldn't be able to earn anything then."

"Oh well, that's for you to decide. But I doubt if the argument's sound. She'd have to stop work for a few months, no doubt, but there *are* such things as creches, you know; and delightful places they are, I believe. And I should have thought her present job was quite possible to a young mother."

"I don't think she'd consent . . ."

"Well, that's for you to fight out. But there's your answer, my boy. Put a child in their arms, and you've got 'em, if they've any virtue in 'em at all, as your dear little lady most certainly has. Got 'em good and fast and for ever."

And Uncle Vic, having said his dangerous word, rose, knocked out his pipe, and went.

He had tossed it forth carelessly enough, but it had settled in a soil ploughed and harrowed and hungry for it. It struck its roots deep in Roddy's mind and swelled. His needs closed upon it and fed it and enlarged it. It would tie Fay to him. It would make him a larger person in the world—a *father*—he who still felt like an errand boy of fourteen! It would give him something else to love, and something that would love him. A daughter. A daughter like Fay. Gosh! . . . "I reckon it's my right," he told himself, as the seed swelled. "Yes, I reckon it's a man's right, all said and done . . . And if I believe it's best for Fay in the end . . ."

But oh, the sadness of doing it by trickery! How beautiful it would have been if Fay and he could have been partners in this, and done it with joy together. The disappointment of doing it in the darkness alone! The self-reproach that twisted in the deed like a worm in the fruit, and withered its joy!

§

And then the sadness, the smart, the increasing sore when Fay, believing she was pregnant, expressed only dismay! Her every word was a pressure on the bruised place. "Oh, Roddy, what are we going to do? What are we going to do? Oh, it'll be the end of everything. I shall lose my job, and I'm *loving* it. I shall never have a minute to myself. I shall have to push a perambulator all day like the women in the market, and I still feel—honestly I do, Roddy, just as I did when I was at school. It's a shame. Oh, I don't want children for a long time yet. They wear you out, and I shall get like Mummy, or even like Vi, and we haven't had enough fun yet. And we can't afford it: we shall be most

terribly poor. I must do something to stop it. I will. Oh, I don't want it, Roddy; I don't want it."

It was a strain to keep down his anger and hide his grievance, to lie and say that it couldn't be what she feared—it just couldn't be, and she knew it couldn't. His head was leaden with the weight of it.

A month later, and her alarm was intolerable. She insisted on seeing a doctor that she might end the suspense. She went to the doctor one day while Roddy was at the shop. And all that day in the shop, among the voices of Lambeth Walk, Roddy's hopes were the opposite of hers. He was eager, excitedly eager, for the answer "Yes." He felt all the sanguine and zestful anticipations of a candidate who will hear to-night the result of an examination in which he knows he has done well. By half-past seven he would know. She was to leave a note for him on the table. He a *father*! Think of hurrying up the hill and telling the Muswells. Telling Gilly and Belle, who were still unmarried. He had surpassed them all! Think of telling the boys in the shop to-morrow. How their silly banter would increase his pride! His mind, instructed by the romances he had read, filled with pictures of tending Fay with gentle solicitude when her time drew near. The sweetness, the incredible miracle, of seeing her slip of a body grow round with *his* child! The heart-piercing moment when first he looked down upon his daughter and felt the grasp of her fingers! Everything would be all right. A few months, and Fay could resume her work: her theatre which loved her would receive her back with joy. She would look after the kid in the daytime, and he would look after it at night. He'd love to. On Sundays and holidays he'd push the pram, not with shame, but with pride. A daughter for him, *Roddy*! It defeated realization.

Ah, thank God, it was seven o'clock. He ran from the shop, jumped on to a bus, fretted and fumed at its halts, and tried to urge it forward by the pressure of his will. His walk from the bus stop to his home was almost a run. His run up the stairs was the bounding of a deer. Into the room, and there on the table was the envelope. With quivering fingers he broke it.

As usual. As usual, the sly refusal of Life to play up to his emotions. Here was no jubilee, nor even grandeur of defeat, but merely—nothing. Nothing but a dull, colourless disappointment. "Darling," said the letter, "the doctor whose a nice man said he couldn't say definitely to-day but I'm to go and see him again next Thursday when he'll know probably I wish I knew Your supper's in the oven Ever yours darling Fay."

Thursday was the one afternoon they had together, so he was able to walk with her to the doctor's house. It was a high house

in Old Lane, of the same pattern as their own, except that its stucco, bricks, and woodwork were as bright as theirs were murky. Fresh from the painter's hand, it looked as clean and pretentious as when it first rose upon the green waste. Roddy did not go in. He walked up and down before the area railings, glancing often at the doctor's windows, and experiencing again all the throbbing anticipation, all the thirst of excited hope, all the thrills of picturing and planning, that he had known in the shop. How endless these waits always seemed. Half an hour . . . three quarters . . . twenty times, a hundred times, he looked at the doctor's door, shining with green paint and brass fittings, but it did not open. Once it clicked open, but only to let out another woman than Fay. Then it shut again. And stayed shut. His limbs and his back began to tire, and he sighed, but changed the sigh quickly, when he remembered his hopes, into whistling or humming. At last, at last: the door was opening again, and this time Fay was saying good-bye on the threshold to a girl dressed as a nurse. She saw him, and her eyes brightened, and she ran down the doctor's linen-white steps. After her fashion she seized his arm, and hugged it against her side, and skipped as she walked with him. "It's all right, I think," she said. "Absolutely all right. He says he's practically certain it's nothing. He's such a nice man. Aren't doctors nice? Oh, Roddy darling, what a relief! Oh, it's so marvellous to feel free again. Just marvellous."

"Why, that's splendid," he said.

§

But, for Fay, the fright had done its work. It had placed a frontier bar between her and him: a bar which she dreaded to move, and which he could lift only with strains. She feared his advances now. Ashamed, she had not told the doctor all: she had said nothing of the violences she had done to herself, after friendly indoctrination by one of the married women at the theatre. Ignorant, bewildered, and solitary, she suspected that she had really been pregnant, and that it was her own hand which had terminated the pregnancy. And therefore she trusted no more in any precautions. Rather, she turned from Roddy when he came to her, pleading weariness or danger; or she yielded her body, but kept her soul in fear, and there was no joy in her eyes, nor love, but only fear.

Then did Roddy suffer indeed. He would turn from her in

anger and misery. He would be silent all the next day; and only slowly did the fog between them evaporate. Then in pity, perhaps, she might play her wifely part, but, no matter how loving her words, how encouraging her embrace, her welcome in reality was reluctant and terrified, as his galled sensitiveness quickly perceived. One terrible night, in a madness of resentment and desire, he took his rights by force; and when she resisted with a voice so loud that he feared Mrs. Houseman would hear below, or the people beyond the wall, he pressed his hand upon her mouth, crying, "Stop it! Don't be a little fool"; and instantly his body began to exult in the savagery, and in the same moment his mind saw the form of Pete Berry in his prison cell; so that he sickened with misery, even as he had his way with her. In shame and wrath and stunned confusion he turned from her; and they lay apart from each other, she silent on her pillow, and he sobbing on his. "Oh, I dunno, I dunno," he kept saying to himself, "I give it up."

Now it was Fay's turn to stay in her tent of silence. She doubted if she could ever forgive him. Dramatically, and according to the conventions of a mind schooled only by novelettes, she announced to herself, "He has destroyed my love." No power of self-criticism had been given her, and she did not discern that she was glad of an excuse to say, "He has destroyed my love." She cooked his meals for him, and cleaned their room, and made their bed, and was glad to escape to the theatre, where the men were gallant and soft with her, and she could compare them with Roddy to his disfavour. On her return she answered his questions stiffly, and got into bed, and turned her face to the wall. And he turned out the light, and got in beside her, and lay thinking, "Oh, I dunno, I dunno, I dunno."

§

It was in these days that he discovered that, if you have not love, the most beautiful thing in life is sleep. To let the warm bed embrace you, to lie huddled as you did in your mother's womb, to sink through a haze of forgetfulness into peace while the body is ravished with content, to wake for a moment and long for sleep again—not the greatest, not the wealthiest, not the happiest man has more. It is the retreat of the defeated to the mother. Out of the past came a voice to Roddy—whose?—where had he heard it long ago?—a hoarse, chuckling voice, from a rubbery face

all crinkling into laughter, and above a loud brown tipster's suit —ah, yes, the raucous, roaring, laughter-laden voice of a lewd little comedian, Duggie Belden, in cross-talk and back-chat with his partner, Daisy: "What's the most beautiful thing in the world, Daisy? The most beautiful thing is sleep."

VII

AND then the shadow for which he had looked at the stage door appeared. But not for him to see. Not yet.

Again a pattern was repeating itself. Just as, years before, Fay had seen Roddy's long glance at her, by the circle door of the old Red Domes, so now, standing within the auditorium by the door of the stalls, ready to pull her curtains across as soon as the house lights went out, she became aware that a man was looking at her. Seated a few rows back, he was staring at her. It was the same look as Roddy's.

In the last seconds before the darkness quenched him, she had time to photograph him on her mind. And as Roddy had seemed more desirable than the lads of Tyers Street, so did this young man seem more desirable than Roddy. He was better dressed: his clothes had the unmistakable cut of the gentleman. He was much fairer, and his eyes were larger, and his skin clearer; and the hand with which he nervously straightened his tie or his light hair was the smooth, slender hand of one who used no heavier tool than a pen. She judged him to be some six years older than Roddy, say twenty-nine or thirty; and she found him the more attractive for that. And in the same brief second before the darkness quenched him, she remembered that she had seen him before, and that his companions had seemed fashionable and well-bred and wealthy.

It was last week. Last week had been a great week for the Queen's Theatre. Its own company had been visiting a midland Repertory theatre, and a real West End Company, glittering with famous names, after visiting the big suburban theatres at Golders Green and Streatham, had consented to come to the antiquated but now very popular theatre at Clapham. Overnight, at the Queen's, all the prices had shot up like crocuses in a March sun. Mr. Annersley Muir had sat up for the whole of a gurgling and enthusiastic night, stamping the tickets with the larger figures—and yet they had had capacity houses all the week. Though they had engaged to pay this important company seventy per cent. of the receipts, they had cleared a profit of over two hundred pounds, and Mr. Muir was preparing to ask his directorate for a rise. Fay had made more commission than ever before, for though it was not really her week in the stalls, Mr. Muir, on the first

night of the week, had shoved and guided her down there, nodding enigmatically. And the stalls had worn an aspect quite new. In the first place their territory was surprisingly enlarged. Swiftly as any dictator, Mr. Muir, in the course of the morning, had picked up the frontier line between stalls and pit (which was a crimson rope) and, marching with it for some distance over the territory of the weak and inferior people of the pit, had set it in a new place further east. Mr. Muir sold no seats for one and four if he could sell them for four and nine. In the second place the stalls, even after this invasion of the pit, were crowded; and, breaking the ranks of the faithful congregation—faithful but drab—were the white shirt-fronts of gentlemen and the shimmering silks of ladies who had come from wealthier suburbs to see a famous show cheaply. The rich smell of cigar smoke mingled with the commoner reek of pipe tobacco; and costly perfumes from the West End with the coarser scents of Clapham.

And so it had been for most of the week; and on the Friday night this young man had come with another fellow and a girl, all three in quiet evening dress, as if they had enjoyed dinner at a restaurant first, or left a prosperous home.

And now he had come again, and Fay knew with no glimmer of doubt that he had come because of her.

The house lights went out, and the play began.

She drew her gold curtains across her doors, and passed out into the lobby. It was Tuesday, and she had watched the play yesterday in a house that seemed sadly thin after the packed houses of last week. She picked up her knitting and her novel from their secret asylum behind a fern, and took them to one of the dusty pink couches under a shaded light. But she did not open her novel, as she knitted. She wanted to think about him. Who and what was he, and where did he come from? If he spoke to her, should she encourage him? And to what end? Now Fay was looking into a mist, and she preferred it to be mist. The thought of leaving a husband was not easy to a daughter of Vauxhall: divorce in her streets was held to be a luxury of the rich, and only the worst took the cheaper road of desertion. Both ideas were repellent to her. She just did not know what she wanted; and was happier not knowing. She knew only that she wanted something.

And so, while within the theatre the First Act was exhibiting its illuminated phantasmagoria, Fay's small black head was a theatre too, in which bright-lit but impossible episodes succeeded one another, as she knitted and knitted in the empty corridor. Sometimes she let fall her knitting, to consider the scenes more carefully.

A roll of applause, a burst of mechanical music—Heavens, how

the time had gone ! The First Act was over. Hastily she dragged her curtains apart, and raced to the bar where her tray awaited her. Snatching it up, she walked quickly down the stairs and through the curtains on to the parterre, which was her market-place. A swing of her eyes told her that he was still in his seat, smoking a cigarette and watching her. And throughout that interval, though she did not look at him again, her trading of chocolates and laughter with her customers was a performance for him. Every movement of her head, her lips, and her hands was for him as an audience. There was a new play in the theatre now, with a single actress and an audience of one ; and each knew this, and each knew that the other knew.

When the last of her trade was done, she sauntered out and stood near the door, wondering if he would follow her. He did—as she had known he would. He rambled into the corridor, and strolled there to and fro, smoking his cigarette and pretending to study the pictures on the gold and pink walls. She was somewhat disappointed to learn that he was shorter than she had imagined—that his figure, however well dressed, lacked the lithe grace of Roddy's—but she did not let this destroy her interest. Short or not, he was most obviously a gentleman, a *real* gentleman. His fair hair, worn rather long, though well and cleanly trimmed, was the colour, and had the burnish, of straw ; and she thought it "rather sweet." His large blue eyes, which once or twice looked straight into hers, were wistful and appealing. Would he sidle up and speak to her ? No. As he dallied near her, she knew that, like Roddy before him, he was too shy, too reverent, too well brought up, to be bold in his approach.

A bell rang in the vestibule and bars ; and the people, pressing out cigarettes or knocking out pipes, flocked past her like sheep into their pen. He went with them, but not without a last swift glance at her, as she waited by her doors. He was gone ; and she pulled her curtains behind him.

When she left the theatre that night, she wondered if she would see him lingering near the stage door. He was not there, and she was sharply disappointed, till she remembered that he probably didn't know that the Front of the House staff used the stage door. Perhaps he was waiting at the front. She did not go to see. It was enough that her disappointment was suspended.

§

And again, like artillery in support, a force from without lined up behind the forces within, and played its contributory part. The Committee of Management of the Queen's Theatre met on the second Wednesday of each month between the matinee and the evening performance. As a rule it was an extraordinary meeting; but in the popular, not the business sense of that term. The directors did not seat themselves around a long table with their chairman at the top; they gathered in the littered office of Mr. Muir, and the first to arrive flung themselves into the easy chairs, or quarrelled for the right to lie supine on the Recamier sofa against the wall, leaving the stiff chairs and the tip-up seats for the late-comers. Only the chairman, Dr. Robert Wellman, and Mr. Muir, as *ex officio* secretary, sat at the big writing-table, where Mr. Muir had cleared a small area among the papers for the chairman's pad and pencil. Mr. Muir himself sat by the corner of the table, with his monocle up for business, and his files and documents on his crossed legs. Punctuality was no more expected of the members than formality. Half-past five was the advertised time of starting, but nobody expected a quorum before ten to six; and even then the quorum had to wait for the chairman. Once started under the hearty chairmanship of Dr. Wellman the meeting bumped and meandered and lunched about, like a car in the hands of an hilarious drunkard.

At twenty minutes past five, on the Wednesday of the sixth week after the West End company's visit, Mr. Annersley Muir stood alone in the room, sorting his ammunition for a victory over his directors. The ammunition, laid upon the table on the top of the papers, books, and wire baskets, consisted of large coloured designs for uniforms, an illustrated catalogue from the Uniform Clothing and Equipment Company, and swatches of patterns of coloured uniform cloths. At five-thirty Mr. McMurray entered with a file under his arm. Mr. McMurray, of Eyre, McMurray and Eyre, Accountants, was a lean Scot, as long and narrow as one of his columns of figures, and as spruce, correct, and punctual.

"Good evening, Muir," said he.

"Good evening, good evening, good evening," endorsed Mr. Muir, still comparing prices and patterns through his monocle. "Do sit down. Sit down somewhere. Anywhere. Any old where."

As the only paid member, and the only precise and business-like one, Mr. McMurray sat himself on a stiff chair.

"Don't think much of your play this week, Muir," he offered.

"It's a flop."

"Is it doing any business?"

"Worst we've done for a year and more."

"A pity, that."

"Dismal. Worse than dismal. Bloody. Just plain bloody, if you know the expression. . . . That's my choice, on the whole. A really chic little design, that. And yet not too chic, considering that some of us are a little *passée*, as you might say. *Passée*. . . . Wouldn't do to emphasize too much that we're past our first freshness and bloom. . . . Past the period of our greatest beauty. . . ." He was talking more to himself than to the accountant, but Mr. McMurray came and looked over his shoulder.

"Ah, verra nice, verra nice. But what are they for?"

"You'll hear. You'll hear, my dear boy. If anyone comes to the meeting, that is."

At five-forty Councillor Parkman came in. Councillor John Parkman, as a stationer, newsagent, and bookseller, was interested in literature and the drama, though his bookselling did not rise higher than some lines of cheap fiction and a twopenny library. He was a stout, sleek, black-coated little man, with the ingratiating and obsequious ways laid upon him by twenty years' service behind his counter.

"Good evening, Mr. Muir. Good evening, Mr. McMurray. I must apologize for being a few minutes late, Mr. Muir. A nice play you've got this week. Very nice."

"It's a flop."

"Oh, do you think so?" Councillor Parkman dropped into an easy chair, and played his fat hands together till they looked like two pink puppies gambolling over each other's bodies. "Why?"

Mr. Muir and Mr. McMurray explained why; and the sleek little councillor expressed a smooth and nodding agreement with all they said, as if they were customers who must be pleased. Probably they were.

This discussion, so free from friction because so well oiled by Councillor Parkman, was interrupted at five-forty five by the entry together of Mr. Ottley and the Rev. Arthur Leyton. Mr. Ottley was the effective, though not nominal, editor of the *Clapham and District Advertiser*, and, as a journalist and artist in literature, was interested in the sister art of the drama. Mr. Muir thought little of him as an artist but much of him as a fount of publicity, and had persuaded the other directors to invite him on to the board. The Rev. Arthur Leyton, a congregational minister of modernist views, and chairman of his own Literary and Debating Society which had a membership of hundreds, had been one of the most active and successful propagandists for the establishment of the Queen's Players. They were very different in appearance, these two men, the editor small, iron grey, and untidy, the minister tall,

silver grey, and dapper; but both were fluent talkers, the editor fluent and dogmatic, and the minister fluent and persuasive. The editor fell into an easy-chair, and put his untidy body to bed in it. The minister sat upon the Recamier sofa, not ungracefully.

Last to arrive (excepting the chairman) was Mr. Bernstein. Mr. Bernstein, a swart and high-shouldered little Jew, was the only director who was not a resident of Clapham. His qualifications were his partnership in a large firm of wholesale costumiers in South London, and his wealth. A generous and ostentatious little man, he had provided loans and guarantees in the early days of the Queen's Players, and was prouder of his position on the board of a theatre than of his chairmanship of his own company.

"Not a good show this week," said the editor.

"A flop," said Mr. Muir. "Still you needn't say so in your review. Say it's intellectual. There's nobody in Clapham who'll know that it isn't. And they'll come along and pretend to enjoy it, and go away and tell everybody else that it's an intellectual treat; and we shall all be satisfied. Say it's a play that definitely ought to be seen, and that we've done Clapham a service by putting it on."

"What I feel is"—began the editor, but he did not get far in his *critique*, for soon the floor shook beneath a heavy tread, the door crashed open, and the chairman burst in. Enormous and breathless and genial, he burst into the room like an elephant into a booth. "Come on, all!" he cried. "I can't wait any longer. The way you keep me waiting is a scandal. It's ten to six. Sorry, boys. But a damned woman patient kept me gassing about her symptoms. Thinks her womb's falling, and I hope it is. Good afternoon, Annersley. Afternoon, Jack. Afternoon, your Reverence. Afternoon, everybody. That damned woman——"

Dr. Robert Wellman, with his huge, pendulous body, small features, loose grey moustache and unsteady *pince nez*, was often likened to the late G. K. Chesterton, and there is no doubt that the resemblance pleased him. Not that he aped the celebrated poet and humourist, because he had no need to, being by nature of the same high-hearted, large-bellied, jovial type. His figure was Falstaffian, and his jests Rabelaisian. He sat himself at the table in Mr. Muir's armchair, hung his *pince nez* sideways on his soft nose, and loomed and swung over the chairman's papers like a mountain asway. "Hey, what's all this junk? Oh God, uniforms again. Nice little sweeties, though, some of these illustrations. This one's adorable. Still, never mind that now. Order, order. Got some minutes, Annersley, boy, have you?"

"Yes, Bob," said Mr. Muir.

"Well, let's have 'em. Get 'em over." And he cut, lipped, and lit a cigar, while Mr. Muir gabbled the minutes.

"Has anybody any objection to my signing these minutes's a correct record?"

As nobody had listened, nobody had.

"Right." Dr. Wellman picked up a pen and signed. His signature was as small as his body was big. "Now then, gentlemen, what's the first item? Ah yes. A comic item, this. This'll make you laugh. Gentlemen, our manager here has a high sense of his own value, as you're all aware. That's the explanation of that monocle in his eye—I never saw such rot—and that tie that goes twice round his collar, and the dam silly suit he wears. The monocle's all my eye, as everybody knows. So's the velvet collar—did'y ever hear anything so silly?—still, we've all got our weaknesses, and I won't take up your time any further with the manager's. The point at issue, gentlemen—and very much at issue, as far as I'm concerned—is that this manager of ours thinks he's overworked, now that the theatre's doing such large business. Is that right, Annersley?"

"That's right, Bob."

"Ha! The bounce of the man! And he submits that he ought to have an assistant. He assures me that he's even got a suitable person in view. A lady."

"Ah!" "Ah, ha!" and "Oh ho!" came from various humourists in the easy chairs, the Rev. Arthur Leyton absenting himself from the facetiousness, but smiling tolerantly.

"I don't know what *you* think, gentlemen," continued the chairman. "I never see him doing any work. What do you say, Councillor Parkman—I'm addressing you as 'Councillor,' Jack, because you won't be one for much longer. The disaffection in your ward is something shocking. You're too polite to the Mayor, they say. They're kicking you out next time, and putting a red hot Socialist in your place."

"Don't you believe it, Doctor," laughed the mild little councillor, deferentially.

"Believe it? I *know* it. Half your electors are my patients, and one man was saying to me only yesterday—however, order, gentlemen, order: what were we discussing? Annersley's new assistant. What's she like, Annersley?"

"She's a very attractive and competent person, Bob."

"Ah!" and "Ah ha!" from the chorus of humourists again.

"She's not the sweetie you've introduced among the programme girls?"

"Lord, no! Great Scott, no! Why, little Fay Stewart's only a baby."

"Exquisite little trifle, that! I feel more and more fatherly towards her each time I see her. D'you know her, Ottley?"

"Do I not?"

"Peach of a child, isn't she? And she gives me the loveliest smile whenever I come in, as if she were really fond of me—but come on—what's this lady want, Annersley? What salary do you propose we should give her?"

"I suggest three pounds ten to start with, Bob."

"The devil you do! We can't afford that, can we, McMurray? What's our position now?"

The accountant opened his file, pulled his lean jaw, and after some study, some wetting of his thumb and turning of his pages, announced that the total profit carried forward so far was six hundred and seventy pounds as compared with a loss of two hundred at the same date last year.

"Hell!" exclaimed the doctor. "And when do we give the chairman a salary?"

"Never," asserted the manager, without a smile, as he examined his finger nails.

"And when do I get a dividend on my five pound share?" demanded Mr. Bernstein.

"Never," repeated Mr. Muir.

"Well, what about my travelling expenses, eh?" suggested Mr. Bernstein. "What about my travelling expenses?"

"I move that an honorarium be immediately given to each of the directors," shouted the editor. "I've never seen why we should do this work for nothing."

"What about an outing for the whole board?" asked the little councillor, so as to have a part in the jocularity. "A nice little trip to Brighton."

"Now then, gentlemen! Order, please. Outing—what nonsense! Outing, forsooth! And Brighton! You ought to know better, Jack. About this woman of the manager's. Where'll she work, Annersley?"

"She'll have to work in here."

"Ah! I see, I see . . ." The chairman removed his *pince nez*, to wipe them. "She'll work in here, will she?"

"I don't see where else she's to work at present, Bob."

"Work in here with you, eh?"

"Yes, I suppose so."

"And is that what the sofa's for?"

Loud laughter from all, except from the Rev. Arthur Leyton, who limited his appreciation to a controlled smile.

"The sofa?" Mr. Muir turned towards the sofa, as if he'd forgotten its existence.

"Yes," said the chairman, wiping his lenses hard.

"The sofa, gentlemen, is there for the convenience of members of the board."

"Together with the manageress?" inquired the chairman.

"As far as I'm concerned, yes. But she's married, I'd have you know."

Dr. Wellman replaced his *pince nez*. "Oh, that's not so good. That's not so bonny, by any means. How big's her husband?"

"Nearly as big as you, Bob. And in much better condition."

"Oh, well, in that case I'm not in on this. No, thank you; I've been in too many tight corners before. And there's the G.M.C., blast them—now then, gentlemen, *please!* . . . Order. . . Remember his Reverence. Sorry, your Reverence: they're a crude lot."

"I know all about them, Mr. Chairman. And I know all about you."

"I'm sorry to hear that. Keep it dark, then, keep it dark for pity's sake; but the question at the moment is, are we to give old Annersley his lady help. I say, Annersley, this is a foul show you've put on this week. Where on earth did you get it from? Is it doing any good?"

"None at all."

"Well, tell young Graham what we think of it. Now is it agreed, gentlemen, that we give Annersley his lady?"

The sense of the meeting, converging upon the chair, from the fauteuils and the sofa and the tip-ups, was "If we can afford it."

"Right. That's agreed. Now the next item. Uniforms and Redecoration. Uniforms. Persistent lad, our Annersley, isn't he? Well, what about it? I think it's all rot myself. I like our old hens as they are. If they were all like the little chicken he's got now, there might be more in it. However, say your say, Annersley. Say your little piece."

Letting his monocle fall, thrusting his hands in his pockets, and tilting his chair back and forth like a rocking chair, Mr. Muir expounded that, since they had decided at the last meeting, after the successful visit of the West End company, to put the redecoration of the theatre in hand at once, they should consider again the question of putting the assistants into new uniforms that would harmonize with the new colour scheme.

As he spoke the chairman watched him through his *pince nez*, and when he had finished, said, "The truth of the matter, gentlemen, is this: our Mr. Muir dresses like a versatile light comedian himself, and he wants a beauty chorus to set him off. But we haven't a beauty chorus. We've a lot of nice old bodies, and I'm not sacking one of them. But if we go putting them into girlish uniforms, we shall be the laughing stock——"

"That's where you're wrong, Bob," interrupted Mr. Muir. "I've got the illustrated catalogue here of Uniquip's——"

"Uni-what?"

"The Uniform Clothing and Equipment Company, of Clerkenwell. They're the best people. There are uniforms here that would look equally well on the youngest and the oldest. Just look at these illustrations."

The chairman adjusted his tumbling *pince-nez*, took the catalogue, and turned its pages. "Ah!" he breathed appreciatively. "Ah yes. . . . Here, gather round, boys, gather round. There's good stuff here."

The directors assembled round his shoulders to study the pictures. They were pictures in colour of ideally beautiful girls in a variety of dainty uniforms. One was a uniform like a crimson beach suit, with a large yellow bow; another was a green costume like a waitress's, with yellow tricolour collar, cuffs, apron, and cap; a third was a plum-coloured uniform, with blue collar, plastron, and belt. And so on, for page after page. To each girl, or to each uniform, was given a name, such as Pamela, Isobel, Freda, Jill, Eunice, and Lola.

"Ah, very dinky!" said the doctor, considering Pamela in her crimson beach suit. And, "Very dear," as his eyes fell on Isobel, with her green waitress frock and gold buttons. "Oh, here's a pretty one. Here's a nice little piece for you, Ottley. Look at that one, Bernstein. Doesn't she do your heart good? And Doris: look at Doris: no flies on Doris, I should say. She'd slap your face, McMurray, if you started making any of your passes at her, as soon as look at you. A pity. What's that, Ottley? Your choice is Evelyn? No, I can't agree with you there: she's rather a duck, I admit, but she knows her own mind too well, with her head carried high like that, and her hair done back, but she's got a dear little neck. Here, I must keep this book—but now then, gentlemen, order. Order. If you've drunk your fill, we'll proceed with the business. I suppose we shall have to give in to this fellow sooner or later, and, if you agree to that, I submit that Isobel's our uniform. The little green waitress—where is she? Yes, I agree that you could put anyone into a uniform like that, whatever her age. And it's not too sharp a contrast with our present uniform. I don't see why we shouldn't have it; really I don't. And we could have it in quiet colours that would harmonize with the new decorations. Pale green and gold, I suggest. What do you say, gentlemen?"

"Yes, if we have any, it must be Isobel," agreed Councillor Parkman. "I quite agree to that."

"I don't see any objection to Isobel," said the minister. "It's quite a neat and modest little uniform, I think."

"Perfectly chaste," endorsed the editor. "And I agree that we can't have anything skittish in trousers. Leave that to the cinemas every time. I vote for Isobel."

"Well, what do we have to pay for these damned uniforms, Annersley?" asked the chairman. "Something dreadful?"

"Isobel's about thirty-five bob, I think."

"Oh, we ought to be able to run to that, oughtn't we, McMurray? Yes, that won't break us. Well, gentlemen, is it agreed that we go half-way to meet this fellow, and give him Isobel? All decided? Right. Now then, Redecoration. Redecoration, and the heating and lighting system. Yes, we shall have to do something about them, if we don't want to explode. . . ."

And so the Directors' Meeting, having played a small part in determining Fay's destiny, lurched and lumbered away from her.

VIII

THE young watcher at the Queen's was even shyer than Roddy at the Red Domes. He came to the theatre once a week, too shy to be seen twice at the same play. He watched, and stared, and floated near her during the entractes, but he did not speak. And when he knew that she was serving in the grand circle or the second circle, he still sat in the stalls, too shy to disclose his real interest. Nor had she descried him near the stage door, though he might have been in hiding somewhere; but she, almost as shy as he, went from the stage door quickly, looking neither to right nor to left, lest she revealed her interest.

It was Mr. Muir's redecorated theatre, Mr. Muir's new lighting, Mr. Muir's new uniforms which stirred the young man to action and speech. As with Roddy when Mr. Sandars, manager of the Red Domes, put Fay into the spotlight, so with this shy follower now, when Mr. Muir put her into a jade green and primrose uniform against a theatre of old rose and gold. He started back, bewildered, one evening in spring when, expecting to see her in black and white, he saw her in a jade green dress with collar and cuffs of primrose tricoline, and a row of gold buttons down her right breast from green collar to green belt.

All that evening he was watching her, watching her. He watched her till the lights went out, watched her through the darkness, watched her peddling her chocolates during the interval, watched her in the corridor; and more than once she knew that he would have spoken, but for the dawdling and intervening crowds. That night, in the narrow side street, he was lounging near the stage door on the other side of the road, by the warehouse wall. She quivered like a tuned string when she saw his short figure there in the shadows—but Roddy was there too, and she was glad of this, because it would stir the watcher's jealousy. She put her arm into Roddy's that another arrow might go into the heart of the young man. But after a few steps she cast a glance over her shoulder, to see if he was still in the shadows, and to give him courage.

And as she lay by Roddy's side that night, she was thinking of another lover. Once Roddy, thinking his own thoughts, and chary nowadays of more than kisses, put his arms around her to kiss her before going to sleep; and she closed her eyes and tried to imagine that these were the new lover's arms. She even pressed her lips

on Roddy's, keeping her eyes closed and pretending that she was kissing the fair-haired boy who had been watching her from under the warehouse wall. And Roddy, pleased with her ardour, turned over on to his other side and slept happily.

The next evening, as she approached the stage door soon after seven, she saw that he was there. Passing in with a pretence of seeing no one, she felt his eyes following her. She slipped into her green uniform and ran to her place. But he did not come into the theatre. Would he be there when she came out? And would he speak, since Roddy could not be there to-night? Three hours of impatience. Three sluggish hours during which she consulted her watch often and sighed. Impatience with the audience for giving the company curtain after curtain. Impatience with Graham Hayes for making them a speech. Impatience with the audience for flocking out so slowly, and with the other attendants for obstructing her in the staff-room. At last she was away, and running down the empty stairs, and through the dead theatre, and over the dark stage to the stage door. A steadying of herself, and she stepped into the street.

He was there. He was there in the darkness under the high grid wall of the theatre, standing across her path, ten yards away. She passed him without a hint of recognition, stepping quickly on her high-heeled shoes. She heard him turn and follow her; and her heart fluttered with the exquisite fear of the hunted.

Now his voice was in her ear. "Excuse me. . . . I'm sorry, but . . ." and she turned her face, its eyebrows lifted in a feigned surprise; and now they were walking side by side. It was disappointing, but only a little, to find that he was but an inch or two taller than she.

"I say, I'm so sorry," he stuttered; "I don't like to butt in on you like this—I hope you won't think me impertinent—but . . . oh, you must *know*. . . ."

"Know what?"

"That I most terribly want to know you. That I've wanted to for ages. Forgive me, but that's the simple truth. I'm afraid I'm one who doesn't believe in dissembling and hypocrisy and—and all that. It's so much better and healthier to try and state the simple objective reality of things without any of the conventional bunk, don't you think?—but so few people have the courage to do so in this world. Forgive me, but surely you've seen me at the theatre, trying to summon up the courage to speak to you, because though I can't accept all the conventional taboos and all the bunkum about maidenly modesty and what-not, it's extraordinarily difficult, sometimes, to shake off the legacy of one's utterly conventional upbringing, you'll admit. Forgive me, but you've seen me, haven't you?"

"Yes, I've seen you there sometimes, I think."

"Well, what do you imagine I came for? To see the shows? Hardly. They're not bad—they're surprisingly good, in fact—but they would hardly draw one for their own sake, you'll admit. No, I've wanted to get to know you ever since I first clapped eyes on you."

Fay walked on in silence.

"Do you think we could know each other, and be friends, and all that? Or perhaps you'd rather not. Tell me to breeze off if you'd rather. I imagine you've got hosts of fellows who want to dance attendance on you. Standing three deep, what?"

His laugh, his voice, his very slang were as different from Roddy's as Roddy's had been different from those of the boys in her streets. His voice was quiet, level, fluent—rather like the voice of the announcer on the radio.

"I imagine you're sufficiently catered for by men who want to take you out."

"Oh, no . . . no . . ."

"But I saw you with a young man last night, blast him! Forgive me, but isn't he your young man?"

"He's my husband."

He did not stop dead. He still walked at her side, but she knew that he was stunned. He said nothing, and she knew what his silence meant: it meant that an airy castle had collapsed, and his world was a desert.

She did not know what to say, so it was in silence that they crossed a windy roadway and came by a dark side street into the bright illumination of Clapham Park Road.

It was he who spoke first. "I see. . . I see. . . I never thought of that. Idiotic of me, but you seemed so young."

"I been married rising three years."

"H'm! Better and better! And you've children, I suppose? That's the next thing I shall hear."

"Oh, no."

"Well, you won't want me. This is where I slope off, obviously. Funny, but I can't quite realize it yet. I'd hoped you were going to let me take you out sometimes—to lunch, or to an afternoon show, or perhaps to a night club, after the theatre, where we could dance. I can usually wangle the afternoons off, because I work with my governor, and he's the Big Noise in our office. And I dreamed of Sundays together in lovely country places. A few more weeks, and the country'll be at its loveliest. I pictured myself sharing it with you. I've always wanted someone to share my enthusiasms with, especially my love for the country, and birds, and wild flowers, and all that."

She looked at him sideways. And she knew that, by that sideways glance, she was handing him a small coin of encouragement. But she wrapped up the coin in words of propriety, like a well-behaved girl. "I don't see how one can do that . . . quite. . . ."

"No . . . I suppose not. . . ." He still walked at her side, brooding. "No . . . I must hop it, I suppose. . . . It's cold, isn't it? Aren't you cold with nothing more on but that light coat, in a biting wind like this? One realizes how high this ground is on a windy night: it gets colder and colder as one comes up from the river towards Clapham Common—I've always noticed it when I've been coming to your theatre. So you're married? Forgive me, but I can't quite adjust to it all at once." And he laughed awkwardly. "Give me time. One can't make a colossal psychological readjustment in a few seconds. Do you mind my walking with you a little further? I don't want to distress you."

"Of course I don't mind."

"Funny it should never have occurred to me that you were married. I just imagined that programme girls never were. Shows how one's brain just doesn't work sometimes. Good for one's pride, if one's conceited enough to think oneself one of the brainy ones. I built up a marvellous castle on ground that wasn't there. A castle in the air with a vengeance, what? Some curious psychological inhibition, I suppose, preventing one from thinking what one doesn't want to think—and yet I always imagined I was one of those who knew all about wish-fulfilment phantasies, and rationalisation, and all the other self-deceiving mechanisms, and was magnificently superior to them, of course. And yet I was just plain inhibited from even asking myself if you were married! Ah, well, nothing can happen now, I suppose."

"I suppose not."

"Hell, I feel a little like committing suicide! But you can at least tell me your name."

"My name? It's Fay."

"Fay! Oh, my aunt, but that's just right! That's you to the life—*le mot juste*. *Le mot juste*, madam! You are 'fey,' did you know that?"

"I never quite know what 'fay' means," she demurred with a smile. And she saw no reason to add that her real name was Fanny.

"Nor do I, quite. But I know that it means you."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"I'm not. I'm sure I'm not the first who's told you that, am I?"

"No. . . . Other people have said it sometimes."

"But Fay *what*? What's the surname?"

"Fay Stewart."

"Oh, then you must be Scotch. Hurray!"

"Well, Roddy always says he is. He always says he's one of the Royal Stuart clan, but I say that's just Roddy's nonsense."

The young man was silenced by that name, so Fay suggested rather archly, "And now you ought to tell me *your* name."

"Mine's a Scotch name, too. Urquhart. That's why I liked to think you were Scotch. Lawrence Urquhart."

"Oh, but it's a *nice* name."

"Do you think so? I think it's a bit soft, sometimes. Where are we walking, by the way?"

"I'm walking towards my home."

"Why, where do you live?"

"In Brixton. I generally get a bus down Acre Lane."

"Once again I never thought of that. I just imagined you lived within a few yards of the theatre. There's no doubt my brain's stopped working where you are concerned. You've properly bemused it. I'm not usually as dumb as this, and I hope you don't think so. Well, I suppose I shall have to be saying good-bye."

"I suppose so. . . ."

"Is this your damned bus?"

"Yes, this one'll do."

"Well. . . . Good God, I never foresaw things happening like this. It's pretty bloody. . . . Still. . . ." He stretched out a hand for her hand to take, and at the same time a long glance for her eyes to receive or refuse. "Good-bye."

Leaning her head to one side and dropping her eyes, she took the hand. "Good-bye." But she held his hand a second too long, lingeringly.

It was enough. It left him still hoping, and allowed her to hope too. She waved to him, as she reached the top deck of the bus; and he waved back, as the bus carried her away. On her back seat, the bus dandling and swaying her as it speeded along the emptying roads, she sat humped a little, but enclosed in a luminous haze of doubt and happiness.

§

Who is this that has come out of the shadows to find Fay? Whence does he come; what is his power, or lack of it; into what compound, injurious or innocuous, or neither, have his thirty years of life kneaded the parts with which he was born? Who is Lawrence Urquhart?

Lawrence Urquhart was born to Douglas and Grace Urquhart when they were small, middle-class people living in an ornate little

villa in Ealing. His father in those days occupied an unimportant table in the office of an Insurance company—but not alone, for Ambition and Resolution and Self-confidence sat with him, prompting his elbow and urging his will and directing his excellent mathematical brain to do better work than any other clerk in that room. He did not stay long in that room. Step by step through the years, a Scotch dourness helping him, he climbed the Insurance stairs till he sat in an important room indeed. A room panelled in mahogany, and picked out with gilt. He was now one of the two managing directors of the Home and Dominions Insurance Company, a small but dignified company, with handsome offices in Lothbury in the City. The family (there was a daughter much younger than Lawrence, and still in her school uniform) now lived in a red and white house on the green Northern Heights beyond Hampstead Heath. It was not a mansion: it was merely one of a file of elegant detached residences that fronted the green expanse of High Common in Hampstead Garden Suburb; but it seemed a grand place to Grace after the little house in Ealing. Grace Urquhart, having known poverty in her youth, hung proudly but insecurely in her place on the Northern Heights; and because Mr. Urquhart also was less secure on this new height than his clothes and his manner suggested, and because his sedulous work in the City gave him no time for original thought, they were a couple who obeyed every formula, fiat, and canon of respectability. They did everything that was done by the best-respected citizens of the Suburb, and nothing that was not done. They condemned everything that was condemned by the huge Nonconformist chapel on North Common, and attended regularly its Sunday morning service, walking across the trim grass with prayer books in their hands.

Like many self-made and simple-hearted fathers, Mr. Urquhart loved to say, "I'm going to give my boy everything that I couldn't have myself. I want him to go to a public school, and afterwards to Oxford. It was always a sorrow to me that I couldn't go to Oxford, and above all I want to send Lawrie there. He at least shall have the advantage of an Oxford career." Extraordinary the simple worship of Oxford by those who have not been there. Mr. Urquhart was a man to achieve his purposes, and he was doing well enough, when the boy was thirteen, to send him to Mill Hill School, and, when he was eighteen, to send him to Oxford, so that he could now say casually, but with a hidden pride, "Yes, my boy's at Oxford."

When Lawrie had fulfilled his time at Oxford, without distinction, but without humiliation either, he entered the service of the Home and Dominions Company, with a view to passing through each of its departments and inheriting at last his father's chair. He took

his Associateship, and at the time of his meeting with Fay was a senior policy clerk.

Thus all the influences and pressure of his youth should have shaped him into a conventional, conforming, God-fearing young man ; and in the inmost centre of his heart this was what he was. In his childhood, if he broke a law, he did it with shame, not with rebellion ; he did not justify the trespass by criticizing the law ; he criticized himself, and never the law. An unoriginal and uncritical adolescent, he did not meet Freedom till very late—too late. Too late because now, however he might try to rebuild his character as a Liberty Hall, its foundations would remain the foundations of a chapel. At Oxford, Freedom being some distance away as yet, his "set" had been an Anglo-Catholic set, a group of graceful and precious young men who called themselves The Spikes, and in those days he had been more likely to desert the family fortress for the Roman camp than for the disorderly tents of the Libertines. He had been more likely, in a word, to turn to the right than to the left.

But in the offices of the Home and Dominions Insurance Company, when his religion was fading, and his tardy desires developing, he opened a friendship with a fellow clerk who introduced him to the goddess Liberty and, being a gaseous young man and, moreover, himself a recent convert and therefore brim-charged with enthusiasm, instructed Lawrie by the hour in the apologetics of the cult and recommended to him all the best books of exegesis to read. And Lawrie listened, and read. And soon, very soon, he was donning the comfortable livery of this new deity with even more fervour than he had donned the showy but constricting vestments of Catholicism. It sat well on his late-come desires—though even now these were not very strong. But he did not display it to his parents. He kept silence when they condemned the lawlessness of the post-war years ; and he still went with them on Sunday mornings across the trim grass to their chapel. To his friend he explained, "They'd never understand, bless their hearts, and I don't want to hurt them. I don't see that anything's gained by hurting people—ever. Half the sins that they condemn aren't sins at all ; but cruelty will always remain a sin. In fact, I maintain it's the only sin ;" which sounded well, though actually it was a case of covering furtiveness and fear, and fundamental doubt, with a speech.

And to say this is to describe Lawrie. He is best presented as a well-meaning, conscientious young man who must justify every new aberration to his conscience ; a shy, timid youth who will talk loud and long to prove that he is bold ; a nice lad in a mess. He imagines himself intellectual, emancipated, subtle, and modern, whereas really he is old-fashioned, simple, not very intelligent,

and fundamentally and forever puritan. He has far more polysyllabic words than clear ideas; and he needs them all for the speeches with which he will justify his deeds. And even so, it is doubtful whether the longest of them will quite satisfy his heart. It is difficult, sometimes, to turn guiltiness into good. Simple persons, such as Fay, will be dazzled by his speeches; but keener ears will detect the psychological malaise behind.

His dream of the perfect mate was as sentimental as Roddy's. His few adventures with women, undertaken partly with the curiosity of an explorer, partly with the conscientious devotion of a neophyte, had been disappointing. They had caused him more discomfort than pleasure, for his shame, however clouded with words, had been greater than his desire. His mother's and father's hands were on his shoulders as he went into those shame-furnished rooms. And always his fear of the women had fought with his appetite till at last his urge towards them was less than his recoil from them, and all his desires were set free to concentrate on the dream of the perfect mate.

And as with Roddy, so with Lawrie; he saw Fay in her seductive uniform of green and gold, dressed up by her masters to attract the money; and all the suspended desires focused themselves on her like the spotlight at the old Red Domes. Her smallness pleased him, because he was small himself, both mentally and bodily, and wanted to be big and strong and protective. Her simplicity and ignorance pleased him, because he liked persons who would admire him, and was ill at ease with those whom he feared were cleverer than himself. And her social inferiority was hardly a hindrance, because he wanted to be superior in her eyes.

In all this he was like Roddy. He was a Roddy pranked out in finer clothes and more expensive words; he was as lonely as Roddy, and as defeated, and as hungry for the lovely and the good, but (because stuffed with undigested doctrines) he was a little windier with words, and a little less clean within.

§

Sunk deep in his love for Fay, even before he spoke to her, he was only thrust deeper by the knowledge that another man had her. As he walked away, after putting her on her bus, his head was like a tossing sea under a brilliant light. Fay was the light in his head, as he walked and walked. He walked down Clapham Rise, and through Vauxhall, and so, without knowing it, past her old home. He walked under the great archway, and over Vauxhall Bridge, and so out of her city; and as he crossed the bridge, leaving her city behind him, the river, silkily shining beneath the lamps and the stars, deepened his sentimentality and his love. He walked

up Vauxhall Bridge Road, and so into the heart of his own city. And not till he was near Victoria Station did he climb on to a bus that would carry him towards his Northern Heights. Even then he was hardly aware of what he was doing.

Despair was no passenger with him on the top deck of that bus. Odd, but the mention of her husband had only quickened his need of her and (though he would have phrased it very differently) the interest of the game. Recalling her every glance during the last months, and her manner to-night, he collected the things that kept hope alight. That backward glance yesterday, as she went off with her husband! That last lingering grasp of her hand to-night! Oh, it meant that she wanted him. Seeing nothing of the Finchley Road, as the late bus rattled and romped along its emptiness, he explained to himself in speeches why, if she were ready to come to him, it would be right to take her. What he meant by "take" he did not yet know. Marriage, if possible—oh, yes, oh, yes!—a perfect marriage, a lifetime of love! But if this were not possible, then perhaps a secret and snatched affair, a romantic and rather pathetic love story, as in the tales of the great lovers . . . Paolo and Francesca . . . Lancelot and Guinevere . . . Abelard and Heloise . . . Duke Philip and the Lady Diomene. . . . The word "seduction" he did not use, both because he called it "old-maid morality," and because it frightened him.

"She loves me. I'm not a fool. I know that. And if she loves me, everything is justified. She can't be happy with that fellow, or she'd have no interest in me. The mere fact that she is looking round with those amazing, wistful eyes of hers for someone else to love is proof that the love between them is already dead, and that theirs is a relationship which would be hardly worth preserving if a better came her way. She put her arm in his because they always do in her class, and because she's affectionate and kind. Oh, my sweet! She wants to be kind and pitying to him, but that's not enough, Fay, my darling, for you. You're much too exquisite a little creature not to get more out of your life than that."

The bus was at the foot of his hill, and he descended from it in a reverie. He climbed up the hill. "If she's not happy, and I can bring her happiness, I'm justified in going back to her. The day has gone by when intelligent people can believe that a man has an everlasting freehold in the possession of a woman—or a woman of a man—regardless of whether they love each other any more. That's just slavery. Only mutual love can give you property rights in one another. *That* I believe: I know that I believe *that*. I believe that people *ought* to be joined everlastingly together, but not by outer chains of law, regardless of their feelings, but by inner and iron-hard chains of love, which they have forged themselves. That's what I want to aim at with someone. Oh, Fay, my dear,

if it could be with you. . . . I would try, I would try. I would try to bring you nothing but happiness always. Oh, my dear, your life mustn't be laid waste by fear of the herd. You're too beautiful to be sacrificed to a tyrannical and terrified and slave-minded mob. You ought to be free to blossom into something very perfect—as you could, I know. Your life ought to be properly fulfilled. Oh, darling if . . . if . . . if you're ready to love me, and I to love you, why then . . .”

At the top of the hill he was almost satisfied that it was a religious duty to go back to her.

§

And next night he went back and waited in the darkness by the stage door, his heart, so to say, battering at the door with anxiety and impatience and hope. It was nearly eleven o'clock, and a tranquil, starlit night. Was the husband in the street anywhere? No: the emptiness of the narrow street was unbroken by any pacing figure, its silence by any approaching footsteps, its darkness by any light except the fanwise beam from the stage door. She must come out soon. Here came the first of the programme girls, easily recognized though wearing their ordinary clothes—any moment now, and she must appear—and yes, yes, here she was, and had she not swung a quick, frightened glance around, in the hope of seeing him there? The darling! She had: he was sure of it. He went straight towards her, and to his joy she met him with a smile.

“I'm so sorry to pop up again like this. You'll forgive me, won't you; but I so want to ask you one thing. May I?”

“Why, of *course*!” That lovely lift of her brows, as if to ask, “But what can it be?”

“Can I see you a little way home?”

“If you like.” That small frightened smile. She was adorable.

“Let's walk, shall we? It's a gorgeous night, and I can talk so much better walking.”

“I don't mind . . . Yes, I should like to walk. Let's. It'd be fun.”

“Good. Come on. Step out, and get warm.”

Together they trod in the tracks of last night. Speaking at first of commonplace things, they went through the dark side streets towards the lights of Clapham Park Road.

Clapham Park Road, for nineteen hours of the day a wide clamorous thoroughfare shaken by the rattle of impetuous traffic, runs and twists along a ridge, till at last it becomes Acre Lane and slides down a gentle gradient to the flat streets that radiate from Brixton Crossways. Lawrie and Fay, coming into it, turned

left for Brixton. Already the quiet of midnight was assembling on the pavements, and the rattle and roar diminishing on the roadway. Silence hung before the shuttered shops and the blinded houses. Except for lovers coupled in doorways, and a mirthful group standing in the glow and steam of a fish frier's, the people were shadows hurrying home. The daytime din of the street had narrowed to a ribbon of uneven rumour in the middle of the carriageway, where the intermittent buses were carrying their passengers home to bed, and the heavy lorries were beginning their journey through the night.

Lawrie and Fay walked on, and neither, as they chatted and laughed, observed that the side streets on their left tilted gently downwards; nor would they have found any interest in this simple fact. They knew that they were walking along Clapham Park Road; they did not know that they were walking along a ridge which, ages ago, was the brink of a low cliff, a continuing and curving cliff, that fronted a level swamp and arrested the Thames at high tide. They did not know that they were walking along the rim of the old tidal basin. They did not notice, as they chatted and laughed, a dip and a rise in the roadway, which had once been a sag in the old cliff. They walked on, and suddenly, since he seemed shy of broaching his question, Fay arched her brows humorously and inquired, "But what was it you wanted to ask me?"

A pause, an awkward, crooked smile, and he said, "I suppose I wanted to ask you if you think I ought to disappear out of your life."

"There's no harm in knowing each other, is there?"

"Oh, I'm so glad you think that. Oh, that's terrific. Of course I, personally, would go much further than that and say—but then I'm an unorthodox sort of person."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, don't let's go into it now. I'll explain to you all that I think one day. I shall love telling you. I love pouring out all my ideas to someone, and I'm sure you'd be a wonderful listener. I might even let *you* say something sometimes. Yes, I'd love to hear all you think too. But now will you forgive me if I ask you a really impertinent question?"

"Why, *yes*! Why, *yes*!"

"I adore that lift of your eyebrows when you say, 'Why, *yes*!' And, incidentally, your eyes are like moonlight nights. Did you know that?"

"Rubbish!" she rebuked him, but well pleased.

"Oh yes they are! They're the colour of a Lapland night. Not that I've ever been in Lapland, but it must look like your eyes, when the moon is up. And they must be the largest eyes

in London. The largest and the brightest, even though they're the darkest blue."

"What awful soppy nonsense! But what was the question?"

"It's—it's just this: are you happy?"

She put her head to one side, and lifted her shoulders, as if to cover a confession with merriment. "Oh, I'm not too bad. . . . Who *is* happy?"

"Then you're not, or you wouldn't have answered like that. You see, as I see things, everything turns on that. I'm quite certain that if two people really loved each other they'd be perfectly happy in any conditions. Of *course* they would. Don't think I'm a sentimentalist; because I'm cocksure that, whatever else I am, I'm not that. I try to be the complete realist, as a matter of fact; I long ago tried to adjust my life to the reality principle rather than to the pleasure principle; but that's not to say that there aren't quite a few ideals one can still believe in passionately. Idealism only becomes sentimentalism when it's forced and unreal—a retreat from reality—an abdication of rational thinking in favour of some irrational but comforting emotion, if you see what I mean. And one ideal that I still hold, and shall hold to the end, is that two people ought to be able to build a perfect love together, and that if they've got that, they've got everything."

"I don't think Roddy and I are quite like that."

"Doesn't he love you?"

"Oh yes! Oh yes, there's no doubt about that. He's passionately in love with me. He always has been."

Lawrie saw at once what had prompted this quick assertion: she had felt that she lost value if unloved. But despite his boast of realism, he shut his eyes to what he had seen. He wanted her free from trickery and perfect, for his delight.

"And you? Do you love him?"

"I don't know. . . . I don't think I've ever known. Of course I must love him in a way, but in a marriage one person always loves more than the other, don't you think?"

"Absolutely. Absolutely—at least, it's *nearly* always like that, but sometimes you get the perfect thing."

"It must be lovely when you do."

"Well, my point is: I'm not going to crash in on you, if you're happy with your—in your home. I'm not such a cad as that. Say the word, and I'll disappear into the night; but if you're less than happy, I don't see—I don't, really—why I shouldn't try to bring you happiness. In fact, I'd go further and say—oh, but I suppose I'm utterly unorthodox."

"Please. . . . I don't quite know what 'unorthodox' means."

"Oh, you darling!" He took her hand in his fingers for a moment. "You are so sweet. It means that I don't accept

everything that's shouted at us by the timid herd. It means that, while I have my own morality, it doesn't necessarily march parallel with Clapham Park Road or Streatham Hill. It means that I doubt if a lot of things dubbed wrong are really wrong at all."

"I shouldn't like to do anything really wrong."

"Does that mean that you want me to clear out?"

"Oh *no*!"

The exclamation had slipped from her, and it filled him with joy. Her defences were breached, and he leapt into the breach and dug there. "I don't see what else I can do, if you accept the orthodox view. It's really for you to say . . . almost. I know what *I* think, but I must consider *you*. I don't want to tempt you to do anything you think's wrong."

"Couldn't we be friends?"

Best to give her some moments of anxiety. He delayed his answer. Best to wield his power, and wound her with the knowledge that she wanted him. The road had broadened into Acre Lane, and soon it would take the name of Brixton; and he looked around for some privacy, some sheltered recess, where he could halt her to talk further, and perhaps to. . . . There was nowhere. Only shuttered shops staring blindly at the high road, or old houses with brief, unsheltered gardens before them. And as they walked round a curve, the campanile of Lambeth Town Hall slid across the sky. And Acre Lane tilted down like a sleigh run, towards Brixton Crossways.

"Damn! Here we are at Brixton," he muttered.

Desperately he looked for some secluded alcove. On the other side of the road, nothing. Only a row of Georgian residences decaying where they stood: their coach-houses and stables already defunct at their sides. On this side—hey, but what were they coming to? A long dwarf wall with spiked railings along it, and shrubs and trees behind it, and an old grey mansion behind them. And at the end of the railings tall piers from which hung wooden gates. Here, amid the harsh modernity of Acre Lane, two stretches of old London lay facing each other.

They were drawing near the wooden gates, and he saw that words were painted on them. "Church Army Work and Aid Home. Bundles, Logs, Wastepaper." Nevertheless the gates, loosely open, gave them a peep into the last century. they saw an island of turf shadowed by sycamore and ilex trees, and a mossy drive curving to an old Ionic portico in the side-wall of the mansion. And the side-wall was blind: its only window, just above the portico, was dark and sightless.

The clock tower of Lambeth Town Hall chimed a quarter after midnight.

He picked up her fingers and said, "Come in here a minute." And the sharp fright in her eyes inflamed him.

In the shadow of the garden he took the whole of her hand; and she suffered him to, only gazing at him still with those frightened eyes.

"Listen, my dear. What's the good of wrapping things up. I never believe in wrapping things up. I'm in love with you—madly in love with you. One minute I feel I should be content just to give you happiness and be no more to you than your dearest friend, and at another I know that I couldn't bear to be with you without touching you and kissing you. But I mustn't do that unless you love me. I mustn't take advantage of you, or do anything to spoil your life. It would be wrong—I see *that*. I never want to hurt you, I love you far too well. I'd run from you rather than do that——"

They were close, and she leaned her body against him. She looked up into his eyes.

"Oh Fay, Fay! Oh, my darling! Do you love me then a little?"

"Yes. . . . I think so. . . ."

"Oh, my *dear*, my *dear*. . . ."

After his kisses she looked up anxiously and asked, "Oh, what are we doing? You don't think very badly of me, do you?"

"My *dear*."

And because this was a loving reproach, spoken very low, she leaned against him again, and closed her eyes.

IX

AND now for a little while Fay stood on the fringe of her lifelong dreamland, and looked in. Stated more simply, she went to lunches with Lawrie in gilded West End restaurants, and lay in his arms on the crimson plush of hotel sitting-rooms, and listened to his fluent and bespangled, but sincerely loving, talk, and was taken by him at last to see the outside of his red and white home, where it fronted the lawns of High Common on the Northern Heights.

Those are the simple facts, but they are not the glamour around them. One may light up the glamour, perhaps, by saying that this daughter of Tyers Street, Vauxhall, crossed the bridges over the Thames, and went out of her own city for a brief visit to the city of her desires. Or that she stepped through the screen of her cinema, and over the footlights of her theatre, into the elegant and expensive world behind.

So it seemed to her ; but, as we shall see, it was not the most expensive world to be found across the bridges.

Once across Vauxhall Bridge she always felt safe. No one from South London would pursue her here ; no one would recognize her here. All the way from Old Lane, Brixton, to Bridgefoot, Vauxhall, the breath of danger was on her cheek ; and she half enjoyed the feel of it, half dreaded it ; but over the bridge and on the north bank the air was all comfort and ease. She stepped off her bus where Lawrie awaited her ; and they visited the palaces of the Strand or the City. Not the dearest palaces. Lawrie's purse was not deep. In the first days he dazzled her with the Waldorf Grill or the Berkeley, but later on, when his expenditure began to frighten him, he took her to the Holborn or the Corner Houses or the Strand Palace Hotel.

But these last were quite as wonderful to Fay, with their marble pillars, obsequious waiters, and melodious orchestras. There are no hotels or palaces south of the river. Always she gave her jump of delight and cried, " Oh, isn't it wonderful ? Oh, I love it ! Oh, what a marvellous place ! " And he was happier then than he had been in the Berkeley, because he was still dazzling her, and it was costing him less.

The more inexperienced she was, the more she charmed him.

He loved to see her study the other people that she might eat the strange dishes properly. Once he made a joke about this, but she flushed so red that he never hurt her in this way again. He tried always to love her as an ideal lover should, with tenderness and understanding and courtesy. The fact that at first she had only one "best dress," and came always in it, stirred him to a pity that was clean and good. And when one day she appeared, blushing and self-conscious, in a brand-new array, copied, as he perceived at once, from one she had seen in the Waldorf Grill—an astrachan cloth swagger coat (though it was summer now) and an astrachan Russian cap—and when she explained, "Oh, it's nothing. It's really your present because I was able to buy it out of all the money I've saved on meals," he was touched, and, lifting up her hand, he pressed it pityingly and said, "My dear, I'd love you in anything. And I'd like to give you everything."

With the same charmed delight he watched her gradual growth and change. She began to walk into the restaurants with an air. She allowed the waiters to remove Madam's coat as if she had been flunkeyed since birth. She sat at the shining table and ate with such delicacy that you would have thought she feared to soil her fingers with the cutlery and glass. She applied her "serviette" to her lips as a lady should. And he chose to regard as wonderful her swift adaptation. In a kind of spiritualized or emasculate sex-act he got pleasure from thinking of her as a soft little pupil whom he was moulding to his desire.

Always he was talking, talking, with enthusiastic gestures and sparkling eyes. At restaurant tables, in taxis, in buses (he soon began to save money by taking buses instead of taxis), along pavements, and in cinema seats he justified his actions and assailed her conventional views with a spate of exposition, while she sat and listened, her large purple eyes fixed on him. And every tenth word in every speech was inserted to impress her. He knew that she could not understand the longer words or the profounder ideas, and that she had never heard of Kant and Schopenhauer, Goethe and Eckermann; he even knew that sometimes the unintelligible words and the unknown names hurt her by enlarging him and humbling her; but he could not resist the temptation to bombard her with them. Wherein he was different from Roddy only in this, that the metal of his guns was slightly heavier, and his store of ammunition larger. He exaggerated his family, his education, his father's position, and his own attainments and prospects. Oxford was his biggest gun, and it fired frequently. But he did not play the braggart without skill, or too blatantly: all his boasts were wrapped up in a soft tissue-paper of modesty, because he was not outwardly vulgar.

And Fay bragged in reply. She spoke of her father as an

engineer, and of the attendants at the theatre as "of very good class"; she contrived to tell him all the flattering things that Mr. Sandars or Mr. Muir, or the actors at the theatre, had said to her; and she did not hesitate to exaggerate her husband's family for her own aggrandizement. And she refrained from all mention of the Thames Swan Laundry and Walton's, the drapers.

So they played with each other across the restaurant tables, and were happy in the game. Now that she was no longer shy of him, she would often tease him. "Don't you *ever* do any work? I wonder you've the face to take your wages. Honestly, I do. I wish *I* had a father who was my managing director. It must be lovely."

"Don't you believe it," he protested. "I have to work jolly hard." But he laid his hand over hers to show that he loved her teasing.

He loved her when she teased him, and he loved her no less when she bragged, though he saw through the bragging easily enough, because he was playing the same game himself, and was wiser than she in the ways of the world. He was now so completely in love with her that he must gild everything about her. So complete, so real, so young a love might have been a clean thing in Lawrie—clean as flood water that brooks no barrier—had he not been compelled to muddy it with explanations. But this disturbance in the river bed she did not see. This love, so vocal, so expressive, so explanatory, she saw only as a long, fleet, silvery flow. When he held her in his arms, his gift of phrase made him a marvellous lover—much more marvellous than Roddy. His superiority in diction and eloquence seemed to make good for her his sad lack of height—or some of it. The haze of illumined words, like a distorting mist magnified him into something as large and fine as she longed for him to be. His lips on her cheek or eyelid, he breathed forth his worshipping words till she nearly swooned for joy. And she answered only by passing her hand again and again over his fine-spun, flaxen hair, and pressing her body against him.

§

Not for a long time did he do more than hold and worship her thus. His puritanism informed him that he must "treat her with great reverence"; which meant, in effect, that the seduction must be slow. On fine afternoons he would drive her out of the city in his little sports-model car, but when it was wet and cold,

and no green privacy was possible for their worship, he would take a private sitting-room at a London hotel (surely a sitting-room was courteous and reverent); and thus a red plush sitting-room, at ten shillings a day, was Lawrie's equivalent for Roddy's dark archway under the viaduct.

Not for a long time did he take her to his Northern Heights and show her the outside of his home. And this because he feared that it was smaller than his bragging had suggested. But at length, one July afternoon, when the gardens of High Common were a flower-show of roses, delphiniums, geraniums, and Canterbury bells, and the lawns were never so trim, and the crimson and white houses looked clean in the sunlight, he asked her, as he helped her courtesously into the little car, "What about driving past my home and having a look at it? Like to, my beautiful?"

"Oh, let's!" she exclaimed. "Yes, I'd love to see where you live."

So he drove her along the Finchley Road and up the hills to the Heights, explaining as the fervent little engine droned through the wind (his voice monotoning almost as ceaselessly) that the ground rents in the Suburb were enormously high and that therefore, of course, the houses couldn't be really big. And by a clean, broad road, tilting upward, the car climbed to the verge of High Common; and Lawrie stopped it.

"There! That house, fourth on the left, is ours."

"Oh, what a lovely, *lovely* part!" exclaimed Fay.

The names of Golders Green and the Garden Suburb may be excuses for satire to the sophisticated, but not to a Fay from Vauxhall. To Fay it was as if the world of her private fantasy, raised by a magician's wand, stood before her; and the name of Golders Green was the perfect fairy-tale name for a hill-city of green gardens and clean golden air. That expanse of trim grass parcelled into tennis courts and bowling greens and open lawns! The red and white houses on parade around it! The gardeners mowing the turf of the private gardens, and releasing the scent of cut grass! The garages with their enamel-green doors! The schoolgirls in their "gym tunics" walking across the grass to the high crimson block in the midst of the common, which were the High School! The youths and girls in their "whites" calling and laughing on the tennis lawns (so different from the black asphalt courts of Archbishop's Park) and the ping of rackets and the beat of balls! She had climbed to a world of green and white out of the smoky grey. And because the hill was so high the blue sky seemed upturned over it all like a bowl; and because the open common was so spacious, the bowl seemed to enclose a quiet, despite the young voices and the beat of balls.

"Oh, how wonderful to live here! Oh, you *are* lucky! It's just perfect."

And he, not sure whether he wholly meant it, but anxious to say a pretty thing, answered, "It won't be perfect till I have you with me in it. *That'll* be perfect, when you and I live together in a place like this. I don't want any more, do you?"

"I should think *not*! Oh, it would be lovely! It would be divine."

Was it possible, was it credible, that Life, after all, was going to give her what she had always wanted? Was it coming, coming, to her? Was she already standing on its brink? Was it so, as some people said, that if you wanted anything enough, you worked your way through every obstacle and came to it in the end? Her heart emptied in the breathlessness of hope. Just as one's heart dies when one's life-dream is broken, so it trembles with an ecstasy of life when the dream stands complete before one and beckons to hope, and hope is afraid to change into certainty.

§

But an eye had been following Fay across the bridges and into the city on the other side. Not a bodily eye: a mind's eye, an imagination, a suspicion, an intense curiosity. It knew that she went over the bridges, and it accompanied her a little way along the roads "up west." Then, distressed by want of knowledge, it lost her in a mist. And it strained to penetrate the mist.

It was the mind's eye of Mrs. Houseman. In a well-ordered world Mrs. Houseman would have been a scholar, just as her husband, the capable Mr. Houseman, would have been an artist. Given fullness of opportunity, given their due of education and development and adulthood, the one might have contributed her discoveries to the sum of human knowledge, and the other created his patterns of beauty. As it was, the one was an inquisitive and finicking landlady with a craving for the accuracy of cleanliness and for precision in her information about her tenants, and the other busied himself behind a snack bar, making patterns of his sandwiches, his salads, his cooked meats, and himself.

In his home in Old Lane Mr. Houseman was a commonplace little man whose fattish body supported a pair of grey flannel trousers and an old shiny blue jacket. Behind his snack bar at the Castle Hotel he was a spruce, brisk, jaunty figure, a model

for a painter, in a snow-white coat and high chef's cap which slanted like the Leaning Tower of Pisa. "Still life" surrounded him. The snack bar, where he performed alone, was a new addition to the saloon: it was white as a milk bar and metallic as an operating theatre; and on its metal-bound counter and its plate-glass fixtures were hams, lobsters, tomatoes, lemons, lettuce, ribs of beef, and dishes of salmon, soused mackerel, and sausages. Ferns decorated the picture, and mirrors reflected it. And Mr. Houseman enjoyed his work among the cooked meats and the ferns, because it satisfied him as an artist. There was art in arranging the display on the porcelain counter before him and on the glass shelves behind. Art in slicing at high speed the beef or the smoked salmon. Art in opening the oysters and marshallling them on a plate. Art in cutting the sandwiches and dressing them with parsley and cress. Art in joking with his customers and enlivening their meal as they sat on their high red stools. And later, at closing time, art in packing all the still life away, at record speed, into his cold, white refrigerators. And because he was a good artist he had a public which rewarded him with popularity and remuneration. The tips rang on his counter as his patrons withdrew.

But his hours were long, as he was wont to tell his public when they were in their seats before him. "Seventy hours a week, old cock. Nine till three, and five-thirty till eleven-fifteen. That's eleven hours a day, and a bit more. Two ribs of beef? Yes, sir. And two halves of bitter? And coffee for the lady? Yes, sir. . . . Yes, eleven hours a day, and only one half-day a week, and every third Sunday. Of course we don't open till eleven o'clock, but all this has got to be prepared; and after we've closed, it's got to be put away, and everything's got to be cleaned and swept and washed up. Let's see, sir: you had two pints of bitter (dear, dear!), one rib of beef, one portion of pickled onions. Let's call it two pints of lemonade, one beef, one portion of violets. Eighteen pence, two and nine, three shillings. Three bob, sir. . . . Yes, seventy hours a week, I make it."

And during these seventy hours, while Mr. Houseman practised as an artist, Mrs. Houseman, left alone in her tall house, practised as a scholar. Avid for knowledge about the ways of mankind, she was driven, as a good scholar should be, to study every phenomenon in the behaviour of her lodgers, and to deduce her hypotheses from the phenomena, and to conduct little experiments to prove that her hypotheses were correct. She probed for information about the family in the basement, not wholly approving of them, a cabinet maker, his wife, and three boys. She was acutely interested in the two sisters, a widow and a spinster, who had the two top rooms. She knew all that could be known about the Ashbys, a commercial

gentleman and his wife, her best-paying tenants in her first floor front rooms. But she was most interested of all in her two young newly-weds in her first floor back. Here Pure Research was helped in its studies by Prurience, because the wife was new and beautiful, and because Mrs. Houseman was getting old and had lost her attraction for Mr. Houseman, who was getting old too.

Her technique as a student was even nimbler than her husband's as an artist. As with him, so with her, her technique was inspired and vivified and made delicate and nice by an essentially admirable thing, her appetite for perfection. It was as restless and thorough-going as her cleaning of her steps or her floorcloth. It was as tidy as her black hair; as taut as the clothes on her round body. Let voices sound above, and she was at the foot of her stairs on soft feet. Let the postman ring, and, before the sound was dead, she was in her dark hall scanning the letters with sharp eyes. Let a lodger come down the stairs, and the same eyes peeped round her door which stood usually ajar. Let the hall door close on a family, and she was at her front window to watch them out of sight. Satisfied that they were gone for an hour, she was up the stairs and in their room, sifting their property in pursuit of knowledge. She found knowledge in cupboards, drawers, refuse bucket, and grate.

And soon from her listening posts, from her observation posts, from her zealous investigations, she deduced a most exciting hypothesis about the young couple in the first floor back. At the staircase foot she had heard an altercation about young Mrs. Stewart's new job at the theatre. She had suspected tears. At the room door she had seen the young man storm out into the night. Then for many days nothing happened except a few small symptoms of divergence—but your scientist is patient. And after a time she observed, standing at her studies in her dark hall, that Mrs. Stewart had a correspondent who wrote to her regularly on good notepaper and in a gentleman's hand, and that his envelopes bore the postmark "E.C.1" or "N.7." And later, as if the envelopes had felt her scrutiny, that the correspondent was typing the address. But a scholar is not defeated by such small variations as that. The postmarks were the same; the paper was the same; and more than once the words, "Home and Dominions Insurance Company, Lothbury, E.C.1" were printed on the flap of the envelope. And why did little Mrs. Stewart always come running down the stairs to see if there was a letter for her? She came down like a lover. Why nowadays did she go out so often for her dinner? She went out like a lover, dressed in her best and with delight in her feet. Why away so long? Why return sometimes only a few minutes before her husband? And always, always,

she was singing now, as she worked in her room above. She sang, "There's moonlight on the Danube, By the hills of Budapest"; and it was like the singing of a girl who knew that she was loved.

And listen: it is nearly lunch time, and she is going out. Look; watch; where did she get that new swagger coat from, eh? And that new dress? *They* didn't cost nothing.

Mrs. Houseman's curiosity was now a lean hound on the leash, straining. No sooner was the ring of Mrs. Stewart's heels lost in the Lane than Mrs. Houseman was running up the stairs—her curiosity running before her like a hound after a hare—and slipping into Mrs. Stewart's room and turning it into an analyst's laboratory. She scoured in drawers, ransacked the wastepaper basket, and raked in the grate. Nothing. The envelopes might be there, but no letters. Burnt paper might be in the grate, but if so, it had been poked into fragments. Why destroy letters or hide them so completely? She had never done this before, as Mrs. Houseman knew, having read quite a few of them.

Where does a lover keep her letters? Mrs. Houseman considered this query, a finger nail at her teeth. She keeps them in her handbag so as to carry them always with her. Yes . . . yes. . . . That's where she keeps them if she keeps them at all. Keeps the last there at any rate till she's answered it, or till she has the heart to destroy it along of the others. . . . Well, wait long enough, watch long enough, and one day, like as not, she will hurry from the house leaving her handbag on the table. To the post, like as not . . . and the nearest pillar-box is three hundred yards away. Three hundred yards there and back is six hundred yards; and six hundred yards is a third of a mile: and a third of a mile should take a good five minutes. Five minutes'd be enough, if one was quick. Yes.

But it was not to the post that Mrs. Stewart ran one night, leaving her handbag behind her. One evening, just before the shops shut, she ran out, hatless and exasperated, to fetch some food for supper, which Sanderson's had promised faithfully to deliver.

She did not run so fast along the street as Mrs. Houseman ran up the stairs. Up the stairs at the double went the scholar. Panting asthmatically, but never mind that. Into the room she ran; and there on the table under the window was the handbag. And in the handbag, just as she had suspected, were the last few letters. With shaking fingers, listening ears, and eyes quick to start in alarm, the scholar snatched out the letters and pursued her studies, skimming, skipping, turning pages quickly, and breathing short and sharp all the time, because of the rapidity of her run, the avidity of her interest, and the trepidation of her guilt.

"My own darling, Yesterday was too wonderful. When you had left I walked back through the City in a daze. I don't know what you had done to me. You seemed to have melted me into insubstantial air, so that I walked like a disembodied spirit among all the solid, dull, black-coated people, whom I pitied—or I think I'll say like an incorporeal incarnation of happiness, which is a contradiction in terms, but who cares? I could hardly believe I wasn't invisible, and I still don't know why I wasn't bumped into by more people or run over by a couple of omnibuses. I've never been drunk with wine, but I certainly get drunk, drunk, drunk with you. I do love you so, my own, my dear. I have never seen anybody so beautiful, my exquisitely lovely little Fay. You are perfect from the top of your head to your exquisite little feet. I always knew your face was wonderful, but I have never seen such a body, such limbs, such skin. But however wonderful yesterday was, I want you to know this, my beloved: the greatest moment of my whole life, the greatest moment I can ever know, was three weeks ago when you said so sweetly, so diffidently, that you would give me all I asked, because it seemed the only thing to do if one really loved. Oh my dear, that was an even more wonderful moment than the first fulfilment of the promise, because, rapturous and incredible and shattering though that was, it is your spiritual love that I care for even more than the physical. To think that a little fellow-creature so lovely as you should have wanted to give herself to me—it is beyond belief, my dear. It melts me with gratitude and adoration and worship. It humbles me. And you are a lovely lover, so responsive and ardent and passionate. Thank you, my dear, for the most poignant joys I have ever known. There is nothing else to say—no other words. Oh, I'm living, living for Friday. Come early, come quickly——"

A footfall in the room above. Quick! No time to read more. Pages of it, pages of it. What of the signature?

"Lawrie."

Lawrie. Mrs. Houseman nodded. She nodded several times as she replaced the letter in its exact position. Pretending horror, she was gratified. She was as gratified at this splendid crowning of her suspicion as she would have been disappointed at its assassination. Who does not prefer fulfilment to anticlimax? "The utter little good-for-nothing! The proper little minx and baggage! So that's the sort of thing they learn at them theatres! It only shows you. And she looking more like a saint out of a stained-glass window than anything else! Well, I never, I never! And *he*—who's *he*, I wonder. Seems ever so much younger and sillier than I thought—quite simple, like, as though he'd never been in love in his life before. And that pore, *pore* young man! That pore, *pore* young Mr. Stewart, who's just wrapped up in her, as anyone

can see! He ought to know. I don't care what anyone says: he really ought to know."

Her gratification was like a heady wine, causing the life to beat high in her, as she retreated hastily down the stairs, with apprehensive eyes on the front door.

X

MRS. HOUSEMAN, Mrs. Adams, and Mrs. Lumley, their shopping bags in their hands, stood gossiping at the area gate. The gate led into the basement of Mrs. Adams' house, which was next to Mrs. Houseman's. Mrs. Adams lived in her basement rooms, and when this gossip was done, she would retire down the area steps. Sparrow twittered in a drooping Virginia creeper which clung to the bricks about the portico as a weeping child leans against the jamb of a door; and the three neighbouring landladies, simple creatures of nature at the mercy of a like urge, twittered beneath the sparrows. And the full light of noonday encouraged both birds and women, while the traffic of Old Lane streamed by without heeding them, its eyes on the fairway ahead.

Any three of the birds were alike, but the three women were very different figures as they tarried and talked by the gate. Mrs. Adams was tall and gaunt and beetling: she leaned over to hear all that Mrs. Houseman was saying. Mrs. Houseman was round and compact and resolute. And Mrs. Lumley, a young woman, was little and thin and sprightly. More restless than either of them, as a child might be, little Mrs. Lumley had none of the concentration and beetling interest of Mrs. Adams, none of the stable and staring resolution of Mrs. Houseman. Though all three were landladies, the two elder women only had the impress of the profession stamped on them. They alone had the fixed, probing, anxious eyes. Little Mrs. Lumley's eyes danced as she listened to them, and sometimes roamed away, as if seeking another interest. She had been married but three years, and had let rooms for but two; and her lodgers still dwelt on the circumference of her life rather than at its centre.

Mrs. Houseman was nodding significantly, with lips compressed. "It's always the same," she said. "Three or four times a week now, and always dressed up like that. It's been going on for months, I don't mind telling you. For months."

Mrs. Adams turned her head and beetled it like a vulture in the direction that Fay had taken, though it was some time since she had passed, and there was no hope of seeing her now. Then she brought back her eyes and raked Mrs. Houseman's face for information.

"But what does it all mean, do you suppose? What's she after?"

"I dunno. I dunno." And now Mrs. Houseman shook her head mysteriously. "I don't like the look of things, I must say. No, I don't like the look of them at all, I'm shore."

"I think only one thing, if you arst me."

"Yes." Again Mrs. Houseman nodded. "I think what I think."

"And what's that?" demanded little Mrs. Lumley.

Mrs. Houseman only shrugged and kept her lips compressed. She was in a quandary. The bursting eagerness to tell all she knew to her neighbours was constricted by two awkward bands: if she revealed her methods of detection, she damaged her vesture of righteousness; and if she admitted to *certain* knowledge that Mrs. Stewart was "not respectable," she must give her notice to quit—so runs the Code in Old Lane. And she did not want to lose a good let. Thus her appetite for righteous denunciation was controlled for the present by both guiltiness and cupidity.

"Perhaps there's nothing in it," laughed the gay little Mrs. Lumley.

"I wish I could think so," said Mrs. Houseman, who wished nothing of the sort. One does not wish the loss of a major interest.

Mrs. Adams shook her long, craning head sadly. "She's carrying on all right with someone, if you arst me."

"I'm just about as shore of it as anyone can be," nodded Mrs. Houseman. "What I mean is, one isn't blind. Gawd knows I don't want to think it, but . . ." and she shrugged again.

"Well, I never! I'd never have believed it, I wouldn't really. Of others, perhaps, especially in these days, but not of her." Mrs. Adams pored over Mrs. Houseman; and disapproval and distress seemed to jut from the beetling face. "She looks that simple and gentle; and so perfectly happy, as a rule, with her nice young husband. Well, well, it's very sad, if it's so. When she first come, I thought she looked like something out of the Bible. I passed the remark to Mr. Adams, I said, 'She looks like something out of the Bible.' I'd been looking at a coloured picture in the Bible, and I said, 'That's that little Mrs. Stewart to the life.' And he said, Yes, it did favour her. It was Miriam, I think——"

But here little Mrs. Lumley, more amused by the scandal than disapproving, interrupted to ask, "But what makes you so sure? Does the other chap come to the house?"

"Not he! I wouldn't have that for a minute," assured Mrs. Houseman, glad of a chance to be righteous. "Let her bring men to the house, and out she goes."

"That's right," nodded Mrs. Adams. "You can't have things going on."

"I should be sorry to have to arst 'em to go. They'll soon'a been with me for three years. And a quiet little couple on the whole, with never any racketing about—anyhow until this come along. Oh well, I suppose what she does outside is no business of mine; but it's the pore young man I'm sorry for."

"Does he know what's going on?"

"Does he—Likely! Do they ever? A quieter and more civil-spoken young gentlemen I've never had. I'm shore I'd do anything for him. If only for his sake, I shouldn't like to have to arst 'em to go. He's always been very happy with me; his old uncle has told me so time and again. Not but what she hasn't always been as quiet and nice a little creature as you could want—always smiling and friendly and no trouble at all. We've had no words at all, not in three years. I'd be sorry to part."

"Well, perhaps there's nothing to it," suggested Mrs. Lumley. "We mustn't be too suspicious. After all, we don't know, and we can't."

This chafed Mrs. Houseman, because she did know. It was not pleasant to be called suspicious when she *knew*. It chafed her so much that she had to find relief in divulging a little more.

"I wish I could feel about it like that, but when a pretty woman—and she *is* pretty; nobody can deny that, and I'm shore I'd be the last to deny it—when a woman like that gets a letter from a man every day of the week"—in her need to justify herself Mrs. Houseman was exaggerating—"you can't tell me there's nothing going on. You just can't."

"But does she?" laughed Mrs. Lumley incredulously. "Does she really?"

"Certainly she does. Practically every morning of the week. The post comes after her husband has left. And I can't help seeing the same letter day after day, when I sort out the post."

"He ought to know," announced Mrs. Adams. "It's only right he should know."

"But you can't go putting notions into his head," protested Mrs. Lumley, stepping aside to let a trio of gabbling girls go by. "Not unless you're sure. Supposing it's all a mistake."

"But, my dear, it's not a mistake. Unfortunately it's by no means a mistake. I'm not one to suspect things about people with no grounds. If you want to know, I as good as *know*."

"*How* can you know. She hasn't told you, has she?"

Maddening, this silly ignorant little woman's disbelief and hint of censure! "Of *course* she hasn't told me. But as I say, one

isn't blind. Heaven knows I don't go prying into my people's affairs—live and let live, I say, so long as they don't bring disrespect on my house—but one can't help seeing things, no matter how you try to keep yourself to yourself, can you, Mrs. Adams? I went up to her room the other day, and——”

Mrs. Houseman paused, while she invented an honourable setting for the drama. She cast her eyes up at the house. That tall grey house, whose rooms were her livelihood, whose reputation and whose clean furnishings made up together the whole of her capital, was her jealously guarded fortress and pride; and yet, such was her swelling desire to publish a piquant tale, such her imperious need to justify herself before an audience, that she was about to release the information which, when its work was done, would mine and destroy her fortress around her. Even as she hesitated, another woman was coming along the pavement to join the audience; another landlady, and she was coming with no other purpose than to rake for this information. She had heard a travelling whisper about Fay, and was straitened till she knew more.

But while she was yet a little way off, Mrs. Houseman continued, “Yes, I went up to her room the other day, just to speak to her, and she wasn't there, and my eye happened to fall on a letter which was lying open on the table, and I couldn't help seeing that it begun, ‘My own darling,’ and then something about ‘my exquisite, my lovely little Fay’—something like that—you know how one sees words, before one knows one's seen them—and it wasn't in her husband's writing, neither; it was in the hand of the fellow whose letter she comes running down to find each morning.”

“Well . . . *well!* . . .” breathed Mrs. Adams, and her gaze perforated Mrs. Houseman's face like a skewer.

“I don't read my people's letters, you can be shore of that, so I didn't see any more. But people should be more careful what they leave lying about, if they want to play these games.”

“*Well!* And she's not been married much above two years! It's not right. You can't say it is: it's not *right*.”

“It wasn't much above two years from her marriage when it begun. They came to me straight from their wedding, you see. They came the same night. *And* two people more properly in love I never see! I felt for them, I did, and I went out of my way to make everything nice for them. Mr. Houseman and I put flowers in their room to welcome them. And now . . . it's sad, as you say. And it nearly breaks my heart to think of that pore young man.”

“*I* think he ought to know. That's what *I* think,” affirmed

Mrs. Adams. "I think it'd be a kindness for someone to tell him. I mean, it's only right."

"I shouldn't like to tell him myself, I must say. No."

"Perhaps your husband——"

Mrs. Houseman laughed. "Mr. Houseman? *He* wouldn't. *He* wouldn't ever. He always says, 'Leave 'em be. Leave 'em to get out of their own messes, so long as they don't trouble you'."

"I don't see that," said Mrs. Adams, musing. "No, I don't see that at all." And her eyes, now gazing along the street, saw nothing but the threat of a disappointment.

"I don't either, I must say," said Mrs. Houseman, musing too.

"But I think he's right," declared Mrs. Lumley. "What's so terribly wrong with a mild flirtation these days——"

"Mild flirtation! Mild flirtation you call it, when she gets a letter every day of the week, and scampers off to dinner with him whenever—but *sh!* . . ." A woman with a shopping bag was coming along the pavement. "This here's his auntie."

§

It was only seldom that Mrs. Muswell came to see Fay after finishing her shopping in the markets of Atlantic Road. She had none of her husband's affection for Roddy's wife. Rather she was half-conscious of a hostility towards her, as she had always been half-conscious of a hostility towards Roddy. By becoming wife to Roddy, Fay had become one body with him, to partake of the troubled and festering hostility of his aunt. Only half-conscious of this hostility towards the young people, Mrs. Muswell was wholly conscious of her hostility towards Mrs. Houseman. She did not like the woman at all. Indeed Mrs. Muswell, though not always so well aware of it as this, was hostile to every person in the world, except her two children, because the world had not treated her well, and she distrusted it. You could see this truth in her sad, suspicious eyes. To-day she had brought these sad, suspicious eyes along the Lane that they might stare up at the tall house, and then contemplate Fay, if she was within, and then scrutinize the face of Mrs. Houseman; because of a rumour that had come but yesterday along the Lane and up the slope of Brixton Hill to its rightful place in Mrs. Muswell's ear.

And Mrs. Houseman was wholly conscious of her hostility towards Mrs. Muswell. She did not care in the least for young Mr. Stewart's aunt. One half of her mind resented the knowledge that Mrs. Muswell was of a better class than herself; and the other half maintained that "she'd no call to give herself airs, since she lets

rooms, same as I do "; and the conflict between these two attitudes produced a recoil from the person who caused it.

"Good morning, Mrs. Houseman."

"Good morning. Mrs. Stewart isn't in, if you were wanting to see her. No. She's gawn out." Mrs. Houseman was glad of this weapon with which to hit at her.

"Oh, what a pity! I hoped——"

"Yes. She's out."

"When will she be back, do you think?"

"I'm shore I don't know—not if she's gawn out to dinner as she usually does now. She won't be back till it's time to go to the theatre—not if she's gawn out to dinner. She never comes home till late these days. Or hardly ever."

Interest turned Mrs. Muswell's eyes into a keen scalpel that probed and probed. But with her lips she only smiled and asked, "Why? Where on earth does she go?"

"I'm shore I don't know. It's no business of mine where she goes."

Not in the words, but in the tone, an insinuation cried to be heard. Mrs. Muswell hungered for its meaning. How help this woman to give it to her? "You sound as though you disapproved," she said with a laugh.

But Mrs. Houseman only shrugged, not wishing to oblige at once. She shifted her eyes from Mrs. Muswell, and stared across the road.

"You don't mean that she's getting herself talked about, do you?"

"She *is* that. But, as I say, it's no business of mine."

"Getting herself talked about? How? What do you mean?"

"Oh well—I dunno—but I feel rather sorry for your pore young nephew, I do really."

"But why—what——"

Mrs. Adams spoke. From her beetling height she had been swinging her glance from one to the other, and now she spoke. "I should tell her what you know, Mrs. Houseman. After all, she's his auntie. If you arst me, I think she's just the person to say a word to him."

Mrs. Muswell looked at the speaker; and she decided that she liked this high, brooding crag of a woman even less than Mrs. Houseman. Who was she to stand there, poking her long veiny nose into the affairs of Mrs. Muswell's family, and issuing gloomy counsel as to the correct behaviour of her betters. "*She's* his auntie," and "*She's* just the person"—confound her interference! And this common little woman, so much younger than the other two, who had muttered, "Tut, tut!" behind her teeth, and turned her face away—evidently she knew something too. However, Mrs. Muswell's humiliation that these common women

should stand by their area gate discussing her nephew with her was defeated by her clamorous desire, nay, her absolute need, to know more. "I think you should certainly tell me if there's anything wrong."

"Yes," encouraged Mrs. Adams. "Yes." And she waited for the story, brooding over them gloomily.

The sparrows chirruped and fluttered in the creeper above.

"Well, I never like interfering, but——" And Mrs. Houseman rehearsed to Mrs. Muswell all that she had told the others, while Mrs. Adams, standing motionless, drank up the narration, and little Mrs. Lumley, keeping her face averted, stared at the traffic drumming heedlessly by.

Mrs. Muswell drank up the narration, too. She drank it with even more savour than Mrs. Adams, who had heard it all before. She made the proper exclamations, "Good gracious!" and "But it's *dreadful*!" and "Oh dear, this is terrible"; but in the depths of her she was pleased—pleased by the excitement of it, pleased at the prospect of hurrying home and alarming her husband, pleased to picture herself discharging her duty, and pleased—yet deeper down; deep, deep below her sight—that the lifelong hostility was satisfied.

"I think it's terrible, if it's what you suspect. Too terrible for words. Dear, dear, *dear*! I don't quite know what to do about it, but we shall have to do something. The poor boy! Good gracious, it's terribly upsetting. But I'm glad you told me. I'm exceedingly glad you told me. It was best."

"Yes," confirmed Mrs. Adams.

"Yes, but I hope you'll keep me out of it," said Mrs. Houseman. "I hope you won't tell them that *I* told you anything. What I've said to you I've said simply for the pore young man's sake. I'm never one to want to cause trouble, and not between husband and wife, ever. But it's just that a word at the right time, and by the right person, may put things right. He ought to know. I can't help feeling he ought to know."

"Yes." Mrs. Adams, well satisfied, said the last word. "I'm sure we were right in telling you. Someone should speak to him, and you're his auntie."

From her beetling height she had given, as it were, the benediction.

§

When Mrs. Muswell, after hastening home with the rapid step of those who carry alarm, burst into Uncle Vic's music room, he was seated at his little table, composing. This morning he

actually was composing, not pretending to; and therefore Mrs. Muswell's intrusion was the more unpardonable. He laid down his pencil and heaved a martyr's sigh. And the gloom that swept over his face suggested that the promise of an early death would be by no means unwelcome. So far from being unwelcome, it would be good news to a suffering man.

"Oh, what—*what* is it now? Good woman, I was working. Incredible as it may seem, I was working. Now the inspiration, such as it was—and I may say it wouldn't come for an unconscionable time—is scattered. An atmosphere which was beginning to gather around me—it took precisely an hour to come—the atmosphere of another world, and of a better world than this, is dispersed." He waved a dispersing hand. "It is always dispersed by the mere opening of the door, but no one will ever understand this, or believe it. Good woman, what is it? Say it; say what you have to say, since the damage is done."

"Could you come into the dining-room while I take off my hat and get the things ready for dinner? It's getting late, and Gilly will be back any minute."

"But why, why in God's name, should I always be sacrificed to Gilly's dinner? Why must my work always take second place to your children's bellies? It's always the same. The reason is, of course, that you estimate its value by its success—which I admit is *nil*—and that is an exceedingly vulgar valuation, my dear Mrs. Muswell. Can't it wait, whatever you have to say? What's the urgency?"

"I think it's very urgent. Very important indeed. It's something I've just heard about Roddy and Fay."

Uncle Vic was interested. He was more than interested; he was excited; but he preferred not to unveil this fact. The grievance of the persecuted is too sweet a meat to exchange at once for the gratitude of the recipient of news. "Well, tell me now; tell me here; and of your charity tell me quick."

"It's take too long. It's a long story. Please come, if you can. I want your advice very badly."

Uncle Vic, an excited boy within, a sighing martyr without, rose. "All right, then. My work is probably irretrievably ruined in any case. The lamp which was beginning to glow quite brightly—after some damnably fitful sputterings at first—is extinguished at the source. Still, we shall all find peace in our graves. Lead on, my dear; and let's get the business over."

And, following behind her, he crossed the passage from music-room to dining-room. On this brief journey he accompanied himself, and consoled himself, with a quotation, spoken aloud for the instruction of Mrs. Muswell. "From too much love of living,

From hope and fear set free, We thank with brief thanksgiving"—here he entered the dining-room—"Whatever gods may be, That no life liveth ever, That dead men rise up never, And that even the weariest river, Winds somewhere safe to sea. Well, what is it? What's the urgent problem?" And he sank into an easy chair.

Mrs. Muswell, removing her hat, straightening her hair, and busying herself with the dinner things, related what she had heard from Fay's landlady. She had good moments as she gave the alarm; and Uncle Vic had quite excellent moments as he listened in his easy chair. Moments so pungent that he forgot to conceal his interest, and stared at her.

What were they to do about it, asked Mrs. Muswell. Someone ought to speak to the boy, she felt convinced; and who was to do this, if not they? She couldn't help feeling that it was their duty to do something quickly. They couldn't just sit by and do nothing, and let two young lives go to rack and ruin.

"Good gracious!" was all Uncle Vic could murmur; and "Good lord!" He had forgotten to be pompous: he was just a natural man, staring.

"I think *you* should talk to him," said Mrs. Muswell. "You're the nearest thing to a father he's got."

"Good God!" mumbled Uncle Vic. "Yes, perhaps so . . . but no . . . no, I shouldn't like to do that . . ."

Each was in a state of conflict. Uncle Vic, in so far as he was a prurient old man, would have liked to go to a young husband, and discuss with him such a stimulating topic; in so far as he was a pompous old poseur, he would have liked to play the fatherly counsellor; but in so far as he was a kindly old gentleman, and very fond of Roddy, he recoiled from hurting him. And Mrs. Muswell, though not displeased (without knowing it) at this chance of a triumph over Roddy, had always been queerly afraid of the boy. And she too could feel pity.

"H'mmm . . ." pondered Uncle Vic.

He toyed with the idea of a letter. He had a talent for letter writing; and it was so much easier to disturb people with a letter than by the spoken word. If you wrote a letter, you did not stand face to face with them and see the pain you were inflicting. You used the right words, after carefully weighing them; and you were not trapped by controversy into clumsiness or inadequacy. You did yourself far greater credit with a letter. He could write a good letter, he felt; a beautiful letter. Already the phrases were forming, full of wisdom and compassion. . . .

But his wife rejected the notion of a letter. It was cowardly, she said; and, besides, letters were dangerous things.

Uncle Vic agreed, with nods ; and after a long discussion, one of the best, one of the few interesting talks he'd had with his wife for years, he accepted her solution that they should go together one evening to Roddy.

They went the next evening, after supper. They came together down Brixton Hill, silently and rather slowly, because now their kinder parts were uppermost, and they were less than happy with their mission of pain. But, however sad they might feel, neither realized how total was the overthrow they were bringing to Roddy. They did not know that they were coming with a sponge to wipe away his only healing, his only victory. Fay was his healing ; the Muswells were the very front and van of the world before which he craved to stand well ; and now the Muswells were coming down the hill to show him that his victory had changed into defeat, and their praise into pity.

They found him in his room, spread over an arm-chair with a book ; and he rose and welcomed them with a smile. How should he know what he was welcoming in ? He put them in the two easy chairs, and pulled up a hard chair for himself.

And Mrs. Muswell, troubled by her nervousness and suspense, came straight to the issue, for her own peace. "Your uncle and I feel that we ought to talk to you about something."

"Yes," endorsed Uncle Vic ; and said no more, since almost for the first time in his life he was completely tongue-tied.

Instantly in Roddy jumped the thrill of pleasure that awaits alarm. He stared, but screened his excitement with a laugh. "But what on earth——"

"You mustn't mind our coming, Roddy," continued Mrs. Muswell, "but we felt there was really no one else to—to tell you——"

"No, you mustn't mind, old boy," Uncle Vic supported her.

"But to tell what ? *What ?* " Roddy's alarm, turning personal now, lost all savour of pleasure. "Nothing dreadful's happened, has it ? Nothing's happened to Fay ? "

"No, no. At least . . ." And Mrs. Muswell, after fiddling with her gloves, told him as gently as she could—told him all that she knew, except that she mentioned no names and withheld the fact that Mrs. Houseman had seen one of Lawrie's letters ; and at the end of her statement she turned to her husband and said, "That's right, isn't it, Victor ? " because she was getting angry with him for sitting there so dumpily, like a stuffed bear, and doing nothing to help.

Roddy was white : white as the china supper-plate which stood

on the table by his elbow. He was gazing into their eyes: gazing as an animal gazes into eyes that menace him with death. "It's a lie!" he breathed. "It's a lie! Tell me who said it. Tell me who said it. Oh God——" And he jumped up and walked blindly to the window, but came back and stood gazing at them again.

Frightened by that corpse-white face, Mrs. Muswell made haste to say, "But no one's suggested the worst, Roddy. No one's suggested anything more than that some man is paying her attentions, and that she is—well—being terribly indiscreet."

"Yes, and I don't suppose there's anything more in it than that, old boy," Uncle Vic comforted. "Fay's a dear little thing really, and loves you, I know. She's absolutely sound at heart, I'm sure, I'm sure. It'll all come all right, Roddy."

"Yes, but *who*, but *who*—*who's* been saying that she goes out to dinner with him every day; who can know that he's for ever writing to her? Who's been talking to you——?"

"Hush! Don't speak so loud. Someone'll hear you. They'll hear you next door."

"Oh, never mind that. I want to know. God in Heaven, who is it? I want to *know*."

"More than one person has said something to me," Mrs. Muswell parried.

"But who *are* they?" demanded Roddy, beating his fingers on the back of a chair. And as he looked at the Muswells, and thought that he was now an object of pity to them, and to Gilly and Belle, his heart turned to water; while his mind framed the words, "I wish they were dead, I wish they were dead."

"I can't mention their names. I don't think that would be fair. They spoke to me in confidence."

"The bloody, interfering, lying cats! I'd like to murder them. Who are they, Uncle Vic?"

"I don't like to tell you, Roddy, if your auntie doesn't."

"I'll find out. I'll find out all right. And who is it that's supposed to be after her—not that I believe a word of it." (But he did, he did.)

"My dear, I don't know. I've heard no names."

"There you are! It's a lie. It's a filthy little bit of scandal. Fay tells me everything." (But she didn't—oh, she didn't.)

Mrs. Muswell, anxious to justify herself, thought of the letter which Mrs. Houseman had seen, but she did not like to speak of that. "I hope it is. I dare say it's only that some man at the theatre's been making up to her, and she's a little flattered by it——"

"Oh!" gasped Roddy.

"You know it's not a satisfactory arrangement, my dear, a young wife idle all day and at a theatre all night. You know what theatres are. A thoroughly loose atmosphere always: nobody with any idea beyond having a good time. And Fay's still very young, and, believe me—I've lived a long time, and I know—all men are not as scrupulous as you. They'll pester any pretty woman."

"That's a fact," assured Uncle Vic.

"Look here, auntie. I insist on knowing who told you all this."

Mrs. Muswell did not answer. She longed to give the name of her informant, but she could not bring herself at once to such a dishonourable breaking of her word. Fortunately for her, Roddy, as his vision cleared, shouted the name; and this enabled her to keep her honour while revealing all.

"I know! Of course! It was that old hag downstairs. It was Mrs. Houseman. Who else could it be? Who else knows anything about our letters? I won't stay in her house another week, if I can help it. It was her, wasn't it?"

Mrs. Muswell admitted that Mrs. Houseman had said something about the letters. "But you mustn't get her wrong, Roddy. She spoke so nicely of you, and seemed so fond of you."

"Yes, she thinks the world of you," said Uncle Vic. "She had said so to me often."

"I don't want her praise, blast her! The damned, interfering, slanderous old cat!" Nevertheless he was mollified, because he so needed praise. "I shall go down and see her at once. I shall go straight down and charge her with it. You can wait here."

"No, no, *no*!" cried Mrs. Muswell. "You can't do that. It wouldn't be fair to me."

"No, you can't let your auntie down like that," chided Uncle Vic.

"No, no, Roddy, come back. Really and truly she meant it kindly. I don't care for the woman, but I'll say that for her. She said the nicest things about you. She said she liked you better than any lodger she'd ever had."

This disarmed Roddy for a time. "All right, then, I'm going to see Fay. I've got to have this out with someone, and at once. I can't stand it, I just can't stand it. What's the time? I shall go straight into the theatre and speak to her there. I just can't—do you mind if I go now? I can't stand it. It's driving me mad."

"Don't take it too seriously, old man," soothed Uncle Vic,

rising from his chair, because Roddy had snatched his cap from the post of the bed. "Don't take it as hard as all that. "We don't *know*—it's little enough, probably—and, anyhow, it'll pass. We don't like to see you like that, Roddy——"

"Of course I take it seriously. Seriously as hell. I'm not having mud thrown at Fay, or pity at me, either. Pass?—it'll never pass—but there's nothing to pass—of course there isn't! Excuse me going off like this: I must get out or I shall go mad. Excuse me—forgive me—please . . . please . . . Good-bye . . . Oh, my God! Oh, my God . . .!"

And he dragged open the door and ran down the stairs, leaving them together in the room they had stricken.

§

No, he would not go straight into the theatre. His plan changed as he walked along Acre Lane. He was walking—walking at high speed—because his head, boiling like a motor's engine, impelled him to do so: it would not suffer him to sit and throb in the prison of a bus. He passed the dark garden entrance where Fay and Lawrie had first embraced; and it said nothing to him as he passed. He did not see it: he was busy with his new plan. Loud though he had cried his disbelief in the story, it was his heart, not his brain, that had emitted the cry. His brain tormented him with belief. Think, think: had she not been strangely happy and sparkling in these last few weeks? Singing and skipping like a girl in love? "Oh my God, oh my God!" If so, it was the one load he could not bear. The loss of Fay's love: humiliation before the Muswells; pity from the Muswells; pity without love from Fay. He must know—know all at once. Suspense ached for its answer, though the answer were sharper than death. He would find out. He would spy on her. Not in the theatre, because there his presence must be known. He would lurk in the dark, narrow street by the stage door. Did she meet anyone? Did she look this way and that for a sight of her lover?

Like a hand on a driving wheel this plan drove him straight, straight, and ruthlessly, ruthlessly, along the elevated and undulating tracks of Acre Lane and Clapham Park Road. It tightened the muscles of his face, and set his mouth in a hard line. The night was clear, and the pavements up here were a processional way for the streams of people coming and going. Those that delayed him he muttered against; those that he collided with he cursed. Cursed because now a deathly thought had joined the

seething brew in his head. Of late she had denied herself to him : was this because she wanted to keep herself for her lover ? " Oh, I cannot bear it. Oh no, no, no ! Fay, Fay, my Fay. If it is so, and it probably is, I only want to die."

The seething brew was mostly anguish ; but was there not in it, somewhere, a tiny savour of delight in the drama ; and, also, a biting savour in the thought of wrath and revenge ?

It was not yet half past ten as he turned into the side street and saw the stage door. Twenty, thirty minutes must pass before she came out. Anyone waiting ? Any brute, smoking a cigarette, as he waited for *his* wife ? No. No man standing by the door ; no man slouching along the footwalk ; no man loitering at the street's end. Almost he was disappointed. But there was time yet. Let him wait here at the far end of the street, in the darkness against the wall. And if the fellow came, and if Fay ran skipping to meet him and put her arm in his—his fists clenched, and the nails bit into the palm. It was some relief, it was almost joy, to imagine, with taut fist, the felling blows—one—two—three—and a fourth as he fell—and a kick as he lay. And then taking Fay home—taking her as a parent takes a child for chastisement. And up in their room gripping both her arms fiercely, her lovely soft arms, and telling her through set teeth, and shaking her. Then slapping her on the cheek—one—two—a stinging slap on either cheek. Perhaps flinging her on to the bed, and there shaking her and beating her. The picture stirred him to lust.

For a long time no one halted in the street. Only now and then a shadowy figure passed quickly from one end to the other. At about a quarter to eleven some giggling girls gathered about the stage door. He knew them well, for he had seen them often before : girls with a " pash " on Graham Hayes or Adela Benson or Monty Carrell. After five or ten minutes the first employees came out, with a " Good night, Bob," to the door keeper. And still there was no man's figure prowling around the sniggering girls. Roddy began to feel happier . . . till his brain, the tormentor, whispered that they might be too cunning to meet here. All right, all right, he would shadow her along the roads, and learn.

Her voice. " Good night, Bob." And there she came, quickly, like a child hurrying from school. No glancing this way or that : she just turned and walked southward on her high, tapping heels ; and he followed like a footpad. Through the dark side streets to the lights of Clapham Park Road—and his heart eased as he saw her pause at a bus stop. The relief was almost pain.

Should he surprise her ? Should he study the effect on her of his abrupt appearance ?

He ran up.

"Hallo, darling. I was waiting for you, but I didn't see you come out."

"Hallo, Roddy."

"I decided to come along, because I was feeling rather in love with you. Strange, eh?" he laughed, though his heart was quivering with doubts. Had she not shown alarm at the thought of his following her? Was she not relieved that he had appeared on a night when she was alone? Or was it all imagination?

"Sweet of you to come, Rods, but I didn't see you when I came out."

"No, I was strolling up and down, and must have missed you. Then they told me at the door that you'd gone, so I chased after you."

"Well, I think it was dear of you. I like to be missed sometimes. But why this sudden devotion, darling?"

"Dunno. It just came from thinking about you, I suppose."

Was she shaken? Had she flushed guiltily? Oh, to get her home and there ask her! To vent all his bursting doubts! To know!

"Well, here's our bus, dear," he laughed. "This is our bus, Mrs. Stewart, I think."

"Yes . . . Yes, Mr. Roderick Stewart."

"Pop in."

"O.K."

On the bus top both sank into silence. He could not speak here, because he wanted to keep his passion, whether of revenge or of resurgent love, for their own closed room. And she—she seemed abstracted, sometimes knitting her brows as she meditated. Her red-pencilled lips were parted, but sometimes they came together, as if they had closed upon a thought. Often she swayed, in an effort, or a pretended effort, to see round the vehicles in front to what lay at the end of the road. Oh, what was she really thinking? Was she not pretending an interest in the prospect ahead, while her mind was held elsewhere?

All the way home, sitting on the bus, walking along Old Lane, climbing the front steps, climbing the stairs, he was composing his phrases and questions; and he had not shut the room door on them both, before he forced the first from his lips.

"Fay darling, I came to meet you to-night because I was worried."

She turned from the cupboard where she was placing her hat, and certainly fright shot from her eyes—but then fright had always shot easily from her eyes: it had been part of her lure for him.

"Worried, my heart? Why?"

"Darling . . . understand that I don't believe a word of it—not a single word, if you say it's all lies, but——"

"But what, Roddy? What?"

He told her, watching her face all the while. It was white at first, and then red—but this might be only anger. Her eyes were still with dismay at first, and then frowning—frowning apparently with anger. And when she spoke, it was to publish an immense anger with the Muswells and Mrs. Houseman and all who had said evil things of her.

"Roddy! Roddy! What nonsense! What utter appalling nonsense! Oh, what brutes people are! That's what they been saying, is it? My heavens, a girl can't move without . . . They'll say anything about anybody. Whatever next? And so they thought I was having a flirtation with somebody! Oh, it's funny, really. I wish it were true, darling; it'd be quite fun. Of *course* I've been out to dinner often and often—if you can call an egg or a scone a dinner. I got tired of cooking, and decided it was as cheap that way, and no trouble. And when I was out, I stayed out. I'd nothing to do all day, so I used to walk along and look at the shops. Sometimes I went up west to look at the really classy shops: Oxford Street, and Bond Street, and—and the others. And they thought—they dared to suggest—oh Roddy!—and you half believed them!"

Doubt was withdrawing: withdrawing like an ache in a tooth. If this were true, why then he had nothing but pity for his lonely little Fay, and pity was a lovely feeling, because it softened so easily into love, and love warmed quickly into desire.

"But why have you never said a word to me about all this? Why do you keep everything to yourself, my darling? I love you so. I can't bear to be outside everything you do."

Her eyebrows lifted in their habitual arch of surprise. "But it wasn't very interesting, love! It didn't seem worth talking about. What do you care about women's shops?"

"But the letters, darling? The letters that old Ma Houseman said came day after day. What's she talking about?"

"The letters? Day after day?" That dimming of her eyes with alarm!—but it was a change more fugitive than the dimming of a lake at night when a scarf of cloud sweeps over the moon—and Fay's eyes had always reflected the passing fears like this, and dimmed and brightened again. "Oh yes, yes. What nonsense! Why, it's comic, darling. The old cat, the prying old mischief-making cat! Gosh, I'd like to tell her a thing or two. I would, only I'm frightened of her, Roddy. I always have been. To tell the truth, I was frightened of her the first time I saw her, and that was why I had to pretend to myself that she was rather an old

pet. She's an old devil, really. I did get a lot of letters from a boy—a silly kid who'd been and got a crush on me. But do you suppose I took any notice of them? I just tore 'em up or burned them. For all I know she read them when they were in bits. It's just the sort of thing she would do. I'm not even sure that I troubled to destroy all of them. There may be some here now—" and, pulling open a drawer, she made as if to search for some. "No, there aren't any, as it happens. No, I remember I destroyed the last of them. But I wish there were some. I'd like to show them to you."

"But why didn't you tell me about them?"

She left the drawer, and came and put her hands on his shoulders, and looked up at him with a smile.

"Sweetheart, need you ask? Have you ever lived with yourself like I've lived with you? I mean, if you'd ever been your own wife, you wouldn't need to ask *that* question, my pet. I never said nothing, because I knew what you are, my loveliest. I knew you'd be upset by them. I knew you'd want to go out and kill somebody. You always go so mad if anyone so much as looks at me. But don't think I mind, Roddy darling: I like you to be a little bit jealous."

"Fay, my precious, this is all true, isn't it? isn't it?"

"Why, of *course* it is! Roddy, of *course* it is! Don't be such an old silly." And she advanced her arms till they encircled his neck. "Why, darling heart, it's comic. And I'm not sure that I oughtn't to be very angry with you for doubting me. But I'm not. In some ways, I think it's rather sweet of you." And she jumped her mouth to his lips.

He snatched her into his arms. "Oh darling, darling! I'm sorry; I know I'm an idiotic fool about you, but it's only because I adore you so. I can't bear anyone else to look at you. You belong to me, don't you?"

"Of course." Her eyes were bright.

"All of you . . . always?"

"Yes, yes."

"I don't think I ever knew how much I loved you till they started suggesting you didn't love me any more. You're all my life."

"I'm so glad."

"I couldn't bear it if what they said was true. I should just lie down and die."

"Well, don't die, darling. I don't want you to die yet awhile." And she passed her hand over his hair, stroking it back from his forehead.

He drew her to the bed where he could fondle and caress her. And she allowed him to, and returned his caresses. And that

night it seemed to him that she sought his arms as never since their first days in this room. It seemed to him that she was inspired with love, her body drinking his with rapture, and her arms enfolding him with protection and comfort and the hunger to heal. Bathed in the joy of it, he believed himself healed and happy again. And he turned from her and slept.

XI

BUT beneath the recovered happiness his low-lying question had persisted. Doubt had gnawed at the centre of his brain like a weevil in the corn. It was present like a pain in his sleep. It fermented in his dreams, so that once in the night it burst from him in a loud cry, "Fay! Fay! Oh, Fay!"

His own cry awoke him, and he turned with shame towards Fay to see if it had awoken her. But she slept peacefully, her back turned to him, her blue-black hair fanning out over the pillow. He lifted his head to hear if he had disturbed the house. No sound from below. No movement in the room next door. No creaking of the floor above. Had he then only dreamed that loud cry? The room was still dark: it was perhaps two o'clock, or three, in the dead hours. Through the parted curtains he could see the blue night outside, and, since fear was palpitating at his heart, the night out there seemed alien and sinister and threatening. It was as if Evil occupied the dark. Somewhere in the east a dog, as usual, was barking monotonously; on a far viaduct a train, after whistling alarm, puffed and chunked and drawled away into the deepest silence; down in one of the back gardens some living creature trespassed among the refuse and the dustbins; once and again the trees rustled as breeze or bird brushed through them; and when the curtains moved in the brief draught, he could believe that some untoward influence was visiting his room more softly than a moth. After a few minutes of listening the clock tower of Lambeth Town Hall sounded two of the quarters: sudden and lonely chimes in the velvet and uneasy night.

He turned again to look at Fay. Strange! He didn't seem to want her as before. His love seemed dead. But if it was dead, why the settled anguish in his dreams? He looked at her, and looked, and could not rebuild his love—and yet. . . . "Oh, I dunno, I dunno," he sighed; and he turned from her, and tried to sleep again.

In the morning his doubt was like a bedfellow that rose with him, dressed with him, and sat with him at the breakfast table. It sat like a ghost between him and Fay. He did not want to eat, but only to drink cup after cup of tea. His love was in a stupor, but for her sake he must conceal this, so he chatted merrily and laughed

loudly. And all the time he longed to be out in the street and walking alone.

And all that day, as he served behind his counter, his brain went grinding on. It ground everything to dust like the coffee machine at his side. Had that love last night been given to him out of pity? Oh, had it? Sometimes she was very pitiful. Take all her actions and words for months past and grind them down. Grind, grind, grind, as the clock creeps round. As the voices jostle together in the shop, just outside his brain, like voices on a platform outside a railway carriage where a traveller sits alone. Voices of customers; voice of the manager; voice of an assistant. "Got any nice biscuits? Marmalade? Those look nice. I'll take half a pound of those. Anyone attending to you, sir? No? *Grocery!* Grocery there, please. Miss Butcher, the 'phone. Oh, well I'll answer it. Hodson and Cooper's speaking. Just a minute. Give me a bill book, Miss Butcher. Pound of best rice. One dumpy jar of Meltonian. Got any of those dumpy jars, laddie? Sorry, madam. They may be coming later in the week. Thank you. Good morning. And now you, sir. What for you, sir?" And when he was not grinding, he was scheming. Scheming to spy on her, trap her in her speech, search in her handbag, her boxes, her chest of drawers. Never an artist with his creative power at topmost pressure was more prolific of ideas than Roddy among the customers and the voices that morning. It was because the scheming eased the ache. Sometimes he justified the schemes to himself: I've a right to know. I damned well reckon I've a right to know"; but more often he just wearily knew that, justified or not, he would act upon them, because their compulsion could not be withstood. Even now he was distended with impatience to be out of the shop, away from the voices, and acting upon them.

He would have an hour at dinner time. It must be used. The unresting creativeness tossed up a scheme. And at half-past one he ran from the shop and jumped on a bus that was heading for his home. He would pretend that he had come for his insurance card. If she was there, she would suspect that it was a spy's trick, but he couldn't help that. Good for her, perhaps, to feel that she was now watched, and that he might appear in her path, anywhere, any time.

He ran up the stairs on cat's feet, and opened the door quickly. Yes, she was there, sitting at the table by the window, before a cut loaf and an empty egg, and staring out at the housebacks; and his heart nearly broke with pity for her loneliness, so that he acted his part well, explaining his return with laughter, chaffing her about her meagre meal, and kissing her forehead.

But—the doubts assembled and corroded him as he went back

to work: hadn't alarm started up in her eyes as he burst in? hadn't she looked terrified as if a guess that he would return had been fulfilled? had she, would you suppose, spent the morning writing to that fellow and telling him that she couldn't leave home to-day, and that he must write to her address no more? How could one find out?

And so back to the shop, and the endless misgiving, the leaping suspicions, the crowding schemes, and the impatience to be out of the shop and at work on the schemes. To be alone in that room, and working.

Such impatience made his quitting of the shop a jet of joy, his journey home a swelling excitement, and his run up the stairs a race into adventure.

Half-past seven. She had already gone to the theatre; and the meal which she had left for him awoke the pity in his heart again—but he started to work. And the work, because it was alleviation, was pleasure.

First, the drawers. One by one he ransacked them. He did not quite know what he was searching for, but he would know it if he found it. He explored under the lining paper of every drawer. In an old purse he found some coins and a note, and he began to do sums. Her earnings, his contributions, their expenditure? He probed further into the purse and found a newspaper cutting, brown with age, and he unfolded it and read, "Wedding of an Usherette. Orange Blossom and Lilies at Vauxhall. Popular Young Couple Married." So she had kept it by her always, poor darling, poor darling! After the drawers the cupboards. "Wedding of an Usherette. Orange Blossom and Lilies at Vauxhall . . ." He felt in coat pockets; he took down dresses and with piercing ingenuity examined them for evidential crumplings; he sniffed at them like a dog for the smell of strange tobacco. "Wedding of an Usherette . . . Nothing there. Where else?" The table. He scrutinized the blotting paper, and held it up before the mirror, that the mirror might turn its hieroglyphics the right way round. Remembering stories he had read, he searched under the mattress, sounded the floor for loose boards, and squinted up the chimney. "Wedding of an . . ." Like Mrs. Houseman, he combed the wastepaper basket, the refuse bucket, and the grate. And all the time he could not have said whether he was hoping or dreading to find something. Probably hoping. To find something would stop the rack. To find nothing would leave him still upon the rack, tortured, tortured.

He found nothing. So either there was nothing in the suspicion—oh, if only he could believe it and be happy again: happy, happy!—or—oh my God, my God!—her ingenuity was outwitting his. It might be that; it might well be that. . . . Oh, how could

one know? What more could one do? Nothing at present; or could one—"Oh my God, give me some peace, some peace. . . ."

§

And another night went by, and another day, with the wheels of his brain ever whirring. Twenty-four hours of doubting, scheming, acting, puzzling, and wrestling with the bewilderment that, while he didn't seem to want her as before, he loved her enough to vow that no one else should have her. Twenty-four hours of benumbed confusion and leaden defeat.

He no longer seemed capable of believing in her. The thought-processes of these nights and days had hypnotized him from all power of believing in her. And this paralysis of love and belief were like a slash across the brain. She had been his mechanism of happiness, and now the mechanism was in pieces.

And then—it was about four o'clock in the afternoon, and the shop was quiet—a new thought came to him, and there was comfort in its hands. He did not suppose that he would act upon it, but it was a wonderful solace to play with it—to play with it instead of with his suspicions. It was more than a solace; it filled his brain with pleasure, and kept all pains at bay. *If* he learned that another fellow had taken his wife from him, he would go out and find the man and kill him. He played with this fancy all the evening, because its power of comfort was so great. None of the women whom he served, and who liked him and laughed with him, knew that this pleasant-faced young man in the white coat and apron was considering methods of murder. The crowds in Lambeth Walk, drifting past a grocer's window, or standing to stare at its bright display, were unaware of a seed that was germinating within, behind the pyramids of canned goods and the steeples of bottled fruits. The costers, yelling at their stalls, "Come along! Come along! Buy, buy, buy! Nah then, ladies: who'll 'ave this for a tanner? Don't go by, don't go by, ladies, when I'm offerin' yer a gift like this—" none of them, hoarsely competing against one another, knew that they were a Dionysian chorus, chanting before a proscenium while the Actor was at work behind.

He did not know why the thought was such peace. All he felt was that it was like a new compensation after the loss of Fay. It was peace to dream of the notoriety his deed would bring, to contemplate the world's sympathy—a medicine which he had always craved—and to compose his dignified answers for the witness box and his last address from the dock. As seven years before when he was an errand boy, so now in the white coat of a provision hand, he rehearsed behind his counter and up in the store room

his lofty and appealing role. The counter was his dock, and his hands rested on it ; the store room was his cell, and he stood alone within its walls ; the staircase was the steps of a scaffold, up which he walked with dignity.

And it was peace to consider how the deed could be done. A knife ? No, he shrank from the thought of knifing a man. It was primitive and savage and ugly, and would lose him sympathy. A blow with a bludgeon that split the skull ? No . . . A shot ? Yes, a shot had dignity. A shot was clean, somehow. But where and how did one get a revolver ? He didn't know—but it didn't matter, because he knew that he would never get one. He was just drinking this idea in long doses, because it was like a drug that put an end to pain.

XII

HIS high-pressure cunning had pierced to one truth: Fay *was* being as ingenious as he. The fire of his jealousy had forged no sharper instrument than the fire of her fear. She *had* stayed indoors that luncheon hour for fear he came spying, and she *had* started with dismay when he came into the room like a prophecy come true, and she *had* spent the morning writing to Lawrie.

Earlier in the morning she had telephoned to his office from a public call-box at Brixton Crossways. But she had done it timidly, and when a woman's voice answered her, "Mr. Urquhart's just gone out, and I'm afraid I don't know when he'll be back. Will you ring again later?" Fay had stuttered, "Oh no. No, I shan't ring again. Would you just tell him that Miss Warren rang up to say that she can't meet him, not this afternoon, and that she's writing? Thank you. Thank you so much"; and she had hurried away from the telephone, as from an appliance that disconcerted her.

She would write to him. She would spend the morning and the afternoon writing to him. It was always easier to write than to telephone. Fay did not take to the telephone easily. She had used it infrequently when she had been deputizing in the cash boxes at her cinemas, but never with ease. A telephone was as much a part of the furniture of the class above her as a private car or a knowledge of French. She hated the red kiosk in the public street, and the buzz of the receiver, and the clicking and ringing, and the far-away voices: she was frightened by these frail ligaments with the darkness and the unknown. And Lawrie, perceiving this recoil from the telephone, and wanting to impress her with his superior ease, would often urge her "just to give him a ring"; and when she hesitated, would enjoy the dainty dalliance of teasing her for her fears. Sometimes he forced her to telephone to him, just because he liked the raillery which it drew from his fellow clerks. "Aha, Lawrie! Who is it? Mr. Cowan, our little Lawrie's got a dame who rings him up. Mention of meetings. Who is she, Lawrie? Who's the baby? She doesn't sound much more than fifteen. Strikes me that our little Mr. Urquhart isn't the pure, simple lad we thought him. I don't like these dames ringing him up at all hours of the day." It flattered him, this badinage; and he smiled tolerantly. He would have liked to

convey in confidence to one or other of them that she was a married woman, young and singularly beautiful and passionately in love with him; and that they had (but only when they were satisfied that they loved each other) "crossed the white line together"; and that he was sure, perfectly sure, they had done right. He would have liked to exhibit his triumph and his modernity, and to justify both with fluent speeches. But at present he had not done so, because his colleagues in the policy department were conventional fellows, who would be quicker to condemn than to applaud.

His disappointment, on receiving Fay's telephoned message, was like a sickening crash. Days and days had gone by since he had been able to possess her in a privacy, and his body was hungry for her. All the previous day and much of the night he had been shaken with anticipation of this day's joys. All the morning he had counted the hours and the minutes. And it so happened that, soon after ten, with the manager's consent, he had gone out on a personal errand for his father (to book seats at the Strand Theatre), and he had seized the opportunity to run into the Waldorf Hotel and book a table in the Grill and a sitting room upstairs. And he had returned to the policy department and found Fay's message.

It had crashed on his desires like the knife of a guillotine. At first his crying disappointment, like that of a child whose sweetmeat is withheld, nearly decided him to rush during the dinner hour to her home in Brixton that he might learn the meaning of the message; but the memory of his repeated promises never to come near the place was enough to forbid this. Then, for a little, he chose to be angry with her. "She can't mess me about like this. Playing fast and loose like this! Just a telephone message at the last moment to say she isn't coming, and she'll write—after I've booked a table and a room, and all! I wonder, I wonder if she isn't getting a touch of swelled head, as a result of all my flattery, all my worshipping speeches, all my perfervid declarations of absolute dependence on her. I suppose she thinks she's now got me on a string, and that it's rather clever to be a little coquettish and *difficile* sometimes, and to ginger up my love with a spot of disappointment every now and again. Well, if that's it, I don't altogether like it, I *must* say. No, dammit, I'm not falling for that sort of treatment. If she starts playing at that game, I can play at it too. After all I've given her, and done for her—and I've introduced her to a kind of life she's never known in her life before; she jolly well ought to remember that—I'm damned well not going to be mucked about like some potty little hanger-on whom she can snub when she's in the mood to. Why, God, I don't know how much money I haven't spent on her in the last few months: I know I shouldn't like to add it up. And she's inclined to take it a bit

for granted, I *must* say. But then all women do ; all women are born gold-diggers. I hoped Fay was different ; Fool that I am, I liked to think her the perfect girl who was above all feminine trickery. But I'm not at all sure that she is. Well, if she isn't, she'll have to have a lesson, that's all. I love you very dearly, my little Fay, but it looks to me as though I shall have to give you a sharp little lesson that I'm not the sort of person to be trifled with at your pleasure."

His mouth was very sullen, as he thought this ; and he spent a pleasant quarter of an hour planning his punishment of her, first by an aggrieved silence and then by a letter whose words would sting.

But as he thought of her weeping under punishment, and of himself taking her into his arms and forgiving her and kissing her tears away, his love and desire began to possess him again ; and it was suddenly revealed to his romantic mind that it would be a prettier thing to be wonderfully understanding with her always, to smile tolerantly at her feminine whims, and to love her the more for them ; and the happier he felt in this new revelation the more his body hungered for her, till at last the thwarted need could get its easement only by pouring itself out into a diffuse and passionate letter.

And so during much of that afternoon, while Roddy, far away, was composing his speeches for witness box, dock, and scaffold, Lawrie at his table in the policy department was composing beautiful phrases for the eyes of Fay, and jotting them down on a memoranda block, so as to have them at hand when he wrote his letter in the evening. His love flamed in proportion to the beauty of the phrases till it must vent at last in verbal recreations, verbal re-enjoyments, of her "gift to him of all." And, writing of this, in sweet and acceptable, but none the less agitating words, he hypnotized himself into believing that he wanted her for ever, and so began to write wildly of "having her as his wife and dear partner till death," and of "sharing with her in the creation of their children." Phrase upon phrase he piled, page upon page he filled, to match the measure of his disappointment and his desire.

He posted his letter that evening ; and it travelled on its zig-zag route across London, while Fay's letter was travelling over the river and up the hills to him. It clicked through Mrs. Houseman's letter box at eight o'clock the next morning, and dropped to the floor in her dark hall. And the postman rang Mrs. Houseman's bell.

§

Mrs. Houseman was at her hall mat before Fay's foot was on her top stair. She heard Fay retreat along the passage to her room,

and knew that she was standing by her open door till the landlady should have sorted the letters, spread them on the table in the hall, and gone back to her kitchen. This aroused her suspicion, and her eyes swept and pierced the letters. Yes, one for Mrs. Stewart, and in the familiar typed envelope, and with the usual postmark, "N.7." And a fat letter too. The fattest he had ever sent. There must be pages and pages of it.

"Oh, it's wicked. That's what it is: just wicked. That pore, pore young man! She can't have a moral to her back. I never knew anything like it. He ought to know; that's the truth of the matter: he ought to know. It'd be a kindness, really, to let him find out so that he can bring her to her senses, and send this fellow about his business. One doesn't like to see a young couple's marriage going to pieces for want of a helping hand. I done what I could in speaking to his auntie, but I daresay he won't believe her; or she done nothing about it. The really good thing'd be for him to see a letter like this. I think he ought to, myself. Yes, I certainly think he ought to. He ought a-tenny-rate to see that she gets letters like this, whether he likes to read it or not."

Quite easy, thought Mrs. Houseman, as she arranged the letters on the table. Just keep it back till she gone to the theatre, and then lay it on the table for him to see when he come in. Pretend it come by a late post. Not steam it open or anything; that'd be dishonourable, but just leave it there for him to see and do what he liked with. To help him, really. To help them both in the long run, as you might say.

Thus, by avowing goodwill and high motives, Mrs. Houseman hid from herself that she was but the vehicle of the Eternal Mischief; and she withdrew into her private place with the letter in her hand, sandwiched between two letters of her own. What she needed not to hide from herself, because it was far beyond her range of vision—what she would have indignantly repudiated, had a wise man whispered it to her as she turned into her room and shut her door, was that the hand which held the letter was also the hand of an Ancient Cruelty that lusts to hurt the young while the bloom is on the skin. She shut her door, and listened. And she heard Mrs. Stewart come quickly down the stairs, stand at the table, and go slowly back. She heard her footsteps creak above the ceiling and her chair drag, as she sat down by her window. She pictured her gazing out of the window with large, sad, blue-black eyes. Some pity moved in her for "the pore little creature," but she reminded herself that "it would be kinder in the long run to pull her up before it was too late." And, anyhow, she couldn't disclose the letter now, not till after another post had been. And though she might deliberate whether to put the letter on the table after the midday post, she knew perfectly well that she was not going

to do this ; that she would retain it till after the evening post. When one has taken the first steps in an exciting game, and its fascination is upon one, one does not, because one cannot, abandon it.

At seven o'clock that night young Mrs. Stewart left the house. Mr. Houseman had long gone to his snack bar ; young Mr. Stewart would not be back till half-past seven ; and Mrs. Houseman was alone in her parts of the house. She waited behind her closed door to make sure that Mrs. Stewart did not return. Mrs. Stewart did not return. The whole house was silent. Mrs. Houseman, the letter in her hand, went into her front room and looked through her curtains down the long stretch of Old Lane. Mrs. Stewart was not in sight. Impossible that she should return now because she was supposed to be at her theatre soon after seven-fifteen. Mrs. Houseman went quickly and quietly from her front room, tossed the letter on to the hall table, and hastened nervously into her back room. And there waited. Waited fifteen minutes, twenty minutes, thirty minutes, impatiently, because the young man was late. Glanced out sometimes at the letter where it lay pale in the darkness. Returned once or twice to her front room window to see if he was in the road. And, not seeing him, came back through the hall, past the pale letter, where it lay on her shining dark-oak table.

It was eight o'clock before she heard the hall door open and shut. She listened. Still as a rotund statue, she listened. He was at the table, scanning the letter ; he was running upstairs in his usual fashion, two steps at a time ; he was crossing the floor above her ceiling ; he was standing by the table near the window. Was he reading the letter ? Yes, he must be : he was standing so still. She crept to her door to listen. No sound as yet. He was standing very still.

§

Roddy was standing very still because his heart was dead. No sooner had he seen that bulging letter on the dark table than he had taken it as a fish takes a bait, and sprung up the stairs to open it, read it, and know. By the window he had unhesitatingly torn it open. And as he read it his heart had slowly swooned and died.

"My own darling. Oh darling and dearest and loveliest Fay, I had such a terrible disappointment when I got back to the office and heard that you couldn't turn up to-day. Your telephone message was like a pistol shot slaying me. I had just gone a mucker and reserved a table and a room at our own old Waldorf,

where we used to go in the early days : do you remember, darling ? ' Do you remember an inn, Miranda ; do you remember an inn ? ' What stopped you from coming ? I'm just drifting through the hours till I get your letter in the morning. When I can't have you, your letters are all I live for. They are so adorably *you*, full of laughter and love and high spirits, and loftily indifferent to punctuation. One day I shall teach you punctuation. As I read them, I see your lips twisting in a shy smile, half ashamed, or your eyes, your incredible Lapland eyes, bluer than the bluest lake at night, lighting up with liveliness and fun, or just looking up adoringly into mine. Then I go mad—mad for you. At first, my pet, I was a little angry with you for putting me off like that ; but only for a minute. You are so sweet with your sudden alarms. It's all so natural, and so adorably feminine ; and of course I understand perfectly that these fears and anxieties and sudden collapses into caution are inseparable from such a situation as ours. Perhaps they will not always be. I hate all furtiveness and deceit as much as you do ; they make me feel all guilty and sick and head-achy sometimes ; but in our case, my dearest, it is a question of choosing the lesser of two evils. We don't want to hurt anyone. And for my part the pain of them is but a small price to pay for the bliss of possessing you. God send it's the same with you ! But oh, to be done with deceit and shams, and to enjoy a flawless happiness together ! Even before your gift to me of all—a gift which, as I have often told you, bewilders me and humbles me when I think of it—humbles me to think that you love me enough to withhold nothing, that you even want me as much as I want you, that *I* can lift *you* to heights of joy as you do me—and we have visited the mountain tops together, sometimes, haven't we, darling ?—even before this happened, I used to dream of having you for my companion for ever, just because your companionship alone was the loveliest experience that had come to me in life ; but now—what now, what now ? My darling, I want you for my wife and dear partner till death. I do, my dear ; I do. And more and more I feel that it would be the only true consummation to a love like ours. Surely we should not lightly cast aside this thing that we have created together. Say what you will, that would be to annul it in the end, and to deny life. Do you remember : ' How do their spirits pass, I wonder, Nights and days in their narrow room ? Still I suppose they sit and ponder What a gift life was, ages ago, Six steps out of the chapel yonder.' And do you remember : ' Where is the use of the lip's red charm, The heaven of hair, the pride of the brow, And the blood that blues the inside arm, Unless we turn, as the soul knows how, The earthly gift to an end divine ? A lady of clay is as good, I trow——' ”

Roddy stood very still. For a little he was beyond movement and beyond tears. Then he walked a few paces, his palm against his temple. He sank to the edge of the bed, and sat there very still. "'We have visited the mountain tops together, sometimes, haven't we, darling? . . . That I can lift *you* to heights of joy . . . ' Oh, Fay, Fay, my Fay! . . . 'The lip's red charm, the pride of the brow, and the blood that blues the inside arm. . . . ' Oh, oh, oh! Christ, Christ, Christ! Come tears; oh, come; for Christ's sake, *come*; break down for me this stone-cold misery. Come, come, *come*! "

Flinging himself across the bed, and plunging his face in the pillow, he tried to start a paroxysm of tears, as a man will try to start a motor engine palpitating when it is frozen. He rocked his body on the bed, as a man will rock his engine when the starting system is jammed and dead. But vain his efforts. No convulsion of tears would start at his striving. "Fay, Fay! Oh, my Fay! She is mine." And then he stopped rocking; he stopped still; he remembered her acceptance of him only two nights before, here on this bed; and he bounded from the bed, as from a torture table. Her words that night! Her kisses! Her passionate hold and vehement embrace! His fists crunched where he stood, and he thought of smashing and stamping upon every frangible object in the room, since he could not cry. He banged his fist on his forehead, and held his hand there for a space, while he thought of killing himself, so that Fay would find him dead with the letter in his hand. But no: then she would go to *him*. And he wasn't going to die till he'd had the consummate relief of charging her with all, nor, by God, till he had settled with the man. At this he remembered his resolve to kill.

And immediately the resolve began the work of healing. All the agonies that could not weep ran to it as into a channel of peace. He ran from the room and out into the street. He had no weapon, but that didn't matter. There was strength in his arm to kill to-night. If the fellow met her at the stage door, he'd knock him senseless, and perhaps stamp on him till he was dead. Running along the hall, and tearing open the door, he had been dimly aware of eyes watching him from Mrs. Houseman's room; but what matter? He was moving now in a world that was meaningless. Only some violence could give it meaning and pattern again. His eyes and head hurt with the meaninglessness of it. He wandered through it like a foreign element which had no relation to anything else. He passed the people in Acre Lane like an inhabitant of another climate, visiting this world, and already a pariah. Women with perambulators, girls carrying their brief beauty along the pavements on high heels, loafers standing at the corners, newsvendors calling news while

they tied their newsbills to railings—all these had their sorrows and their angers and their frets, and were often tired, but they had kept their place in the pattern, and dwelt in comparative peace. They could laugh. He alone was alone, his connections snapped. It was stupefying ; it was deadening ; it was a woodenness in the head and the eyes ; but it couldn't be helped : it was just so. He did not walk fast to the unknown event that waited. Rather, like a worn-out automaton, he moved in a languid rhythm towards it. He knew that he would never see the shop again ; never sit at table with friends again ; never visit theatre or picture house again, as did these passing people, and laugh, and applaud, and return after the show to the common things of home ; never again lie down to sleep in the way of ordinary men ; never again clasp another's body in the way of love. It could not be realized, but it could be known. It just was so. By to-morrow night the thing would have happened. It would happen to-night, or in the morning. What after—he did not know.

XIII

No one met Fay at the stage door, for that morning Lawrie had received her letter warning him to keep away. "Good night, Bob," she said to the doorkeeper; and "Good night, miss," he replied to her, from his bench where he sat with his pipe in his mouth, and his back at rest in the angle formed by the cold brick wall and the wooden partition of his office. "It was trying to rain about an hour ago, but it's a fine night now." "Is it? Good. Why, yes, it's lovely!" And she stepped into the street. She looked up and down the street for Roddy, but she did not see him, because he was hidden. And she turned and walked in her usual path towards her bus. And Roddy shadowed her from safe distances, his intense concentration giving his eyes a longer range and the power of arrows to pierce the dark. And when Fay was in a half-empty bus, and it was trundling over the wood-blocks of Clapham Park Road like a tumbrel, he was seated in the bus behind, bent forward on the front seat of its upper deck, and straining his gaze through its window on to the hinder parts of her bus, as the pilot of a pursuit plane strains on his prey.

She descended from her bus at Brixton Crossways and, running over the broad circus, which midnight was clearing of traffic, walked into Old Lane. Roddy, still a long way behind, followed. He saw her go up the steps and into the house. He heard the door shut. And he waited in the street. He lit a cigarette and walked up and down, but the cigarette died in his lips, and he threw it away. He seemed to have done with such appurtenances to normal life. The chimes of Lambeth Town Hall sang over the roofs. He looked at his wrist watch. Half-past eleven. When the chimes, sounding again, told him that Fay had been in their room a quarter of an hour, he too went up the steps, though languidly, and passed through the door.

The hall was dark except for a grey illumination that came from the glass door at the end of the passage, and from the panes of the front door behind him. No light beneath the door of the front room, which was the Housemans' bedroom. No light beneath the door of their living-room behind. Then they were in bed, perhaps,

and wooing sleep. He went up the stairs quietly but slowly, as if the lead was in his feet as well as in his head and heart. A light beneath his own door. He opened it, and saw her sitting on the bed. Her frock was already off, and she was in her peach silk slip, peeling off her stockings by the harsh, white light of the single, gas mantle.

"Hallo," she greeted him, smiling. "Where've you been?"

"Out," he answered; and no more; and, shutting the door quietly, he went to the window and pulled the curtains an inch or two apart. The long canyon between the housebacks was dark and stilled, the domes of the trees unmoving and asleep in the windless air. Here and there on the high cliffs of the housebacks a window burned yellow and oblong. One of these lighted oblongs, half-way up a cliff on the first floor, quenched itself as he watched. Its light slipped from the dome of a lime tree beneath; and the garden under it ceased to be.

"You *are* cheerful," laughed Fay. "Whatever's the matter?"

"Oh, nothing," he answered satirically. "Absolutely nothing. Just nothing"; and he continued to look out. His gaze was hung upon one lighted window, and he was telling himself stupidly, "When that light goes out, I will turn and speak."

"Oh, well," sighed Fay, with a resigned shrug. "If you're like that . . ." and she said no more, implying that there was no coping with him when he was in one of his moods.

That she should treat with easy contempt his wooden anguish, she who had caused it, was like a bullet in his back. His jaw shot forward, and his lower lip, straightening, bared his teeth. Why wouldn't that light go out, so that he could turn and speak? Faintly he heard the town hall clock striking again; and a moment later the light went out. He pulled the curtains together, so that the room was now but a box of white, incandescent light in which they were shut in by themselves. Then he turned round and looked at her. She was sitting on the bed in blue silk pyjamas, combing back her hair.

"You're a pretty little liar, aren't you?" he said.

"What do you mean?" Her great eyes fixed themselves on him, and filled with terror.

"Fan letters. They were all fan letters, weren't they? Fan letters from some silly boy who'd got a crush on you. And you took no notice of them. You just laughed at them, and destroyed them, didn't you? You didn't go and meet the fellow, did you? No, not once. You haven't been spending day after day with him, while I've been working for you, have you?" He advanced towards her. "And you haven't been to bed with him, have you? Oh, no. Not once. You haven't given him things that you

refused to me, except when you wanted to keep me quiet. It was just a trick to deceive me the other night, wasn't it? It was just damned fine acting. Oh, damned fine: they couldn't have done it better on the stage of your theatre, I'll be bound. And you haven't discussed with him how to get rid of me, have you? You haven't, *have* you?"

"No! . . . No! Roddy, I don't know what you're talking about. . . . Oh, Roddy, what's the matter?"

"Stop lying! Stop lying, you little cur! I *know*. You thought you had the world's biggest fool for a husband, but you were wrong. You were wrong, my pet."

"Roddy! What do you mean?"

"*Have* you given yourself to this —? Have you?"

"No, no! No, no, no!"

"No? Indeed? It's 'No,' is it? Well, seeing as you didn't take his letters seriously, I opened one that came this evening, and read it. Here it is."

She was almost as white as the pillows behind her. She jumped up and ran forward to snatch the letter. His hand shot out to her breast and thrust her from it, so that she staggered back and only recovered her balance by falling against the bed.

"Get back!" he cried, approaching her with shoulders forward, knees bent, and elbows level, as if his hands were waiting to spring. Unconsciously he was reproducing the posture and walk of the wrestlers at the Ring. It was the tread of a gorilla. "Get back!"

"Roddy! Roddy, why are you looking at me like that? You look quite different. What's the matter? Oh, you look awful!"

She lowered her body before him, and he exulted in his power. Her hands, stretched behind her, felt for support on the bed.

"Yes, sit there, my beloved. I'll talk. I'll do the talking. And we'll see how much truth you can tell. You don't know how much the fool has said in his letter, do you? But I do, my honey. Eh? A fat letter, isn't it? Look. Room for quite a lot of information. Now then, who is this man? Give me his name."

"Roddy! . . ."

"Come on! His name? You don't know how much of his name he's signed, do you? Well, I do; and I want to see if you're telling the truth, see."

"His name's Lawrie."

"Lawrie what?"

"Roddy, what are you going to do?"

"Kill him, of course. What do you think?"

"Roddy, don't be—don't be absurd. Don't be mad."

"Absurd? Absurd, is it, to mind if a dirty — takes my wife from me? And mad? All right, I'm absurd. Hurray? Now we know. Yes, darling, I'm absurd. And just a little mad, too, see."

"Roddy!—oh, don't look at me like that. Please, *please*."

"How many times have you give yourself to him? How many times, sweetheart?"

"I haven't! I haven't!"

"Liar!" he shot at her through a straight slit of a mouth. "This letter's about nothing else. Now how many times have you been with him?"

"Roddy!" she pleaded.

"Come on!" And he came nearer and bent over her, and she cringed sideways towards the pillows. "Come on! Out with it. How many times? Five hundred?"

"Roddy, I——"

He seized the lapels of her blue jacket and thrust her flat upon the bed. "Come on!" he hissed.

"Only once or twice . . . only once or twice."

"Once or twice." His teeth came over his lower lip and bit it. His hands came away from her jacket, and he stared down upon her, thrown back beneath him. Once or twice. Three or four times. He nodded at the thought. Three times a week, maybe. He pictured her lying there for the other man, and welcoming him with brightened eyes and opened arms. His fists clenched; then opened into claws.

"Roddy . . . Roddy, I'll not do it again."

"Only once or twice," he repeated. "Yes . . . I guess I know what once or twice means . . . Yes . . ." He was wilfully maddening himself with pictures of her offering herself to the other man and revealing to him her joy. And she had been *his*. And she was his no more. Never could be now, whatever happened; never again, never again. He felt again that slash across the brain which means utter confounding and defeat and despair, when life has fallen in pieces because the only thing by which one lives, the only joy in one's days, is destroyed, is destroyed.

Fay was his no more. But if she was not his, she was going to be no one else's. No, no, no. That was a thought which was not to be borne.

"Roddy!"

Somewhere at the back of his mind he heard her terrified cry, but he had other things to think of. He was creating his pictures. He was amassing wrath and madness enough to move his arm.

"Roddy, don't touch me. Leave me alone, or I shall scream. I shall scream the house down."

"Oh, no, you won't," he breathed low at her. "That's easily stopped. And you won't move." He flung her back, as she moved to get from under his threat. Her hands were now at her mouth, as she stared up at him; and he seized her wrists and dragged them away; then seized her shoulders, because it was lovely to take her and shake her. Having shaken her, he flung her back upon the bed.

She gave a quick scream. And instantly his palm was over her mouth, and pressing hard. "Oh, no, you don't!" With his knee he clamped down one of her arms, and forced the other arm against the side of the bed with his standing leg. And he smiled to have her clamped so secure. A lock; a lock, by God! as we used to say at the Ring. One, two, three: a fall, referee, I think; a fall! She's down, isn't she? I think both shoulder blades are down. . . . Fay struggled to get her mouth away. "No, no, you don't, my lovely! Not a sound, my pet. *I'll* see to that." And, still smiling, he threw his weight on the hand pressing her mouth, while he turned an ear and listened.

The bed in the next room had creaked. Had its occupants, the Ashbys, been awakened by Fay's quick scream? A creak, and no more. And he smiled again. Ha, ha! Funny! They would think it no more than a sound flung off in the course of an amorous struggle. Often enough through that wall he had heard low voices, and quick gasps, half protesting, half yielding, as the amorous play went on. And lest they should be listening beyond that wall, he laughed aloud. He said, "Ha, ha!" and "Never mind, darling," and "I love you, my pet. I love you so dearly. You're all my life to me, and always have been. It's only when I've got you in my arms that I know what perfect happiness is . . . perfect happiness and peace"; while Fay's eyes stared up at him, above his clamping hand, in a madness of terror.

"No, you don't!"

She was struggling again—and if she worked her mouth free and screamed, he was defeated. Defeated, with nothing solved; and back at the beginning again. She was biting his palm. "Oh, would you? Would you, my dear? We'll soon see to that. No, Fay, my pretty, we're not having that. Eh, would you?" His free hand snatched a pillow, and whipped it over her face; and now with both hands he pressed it down. "See, darling? We're not having any of it. What can you do now, eh?" Viciously he clamped it down.

Yes, and what could *he* do now? He dared not move it. She struggled, and he controlled her struggles with his elbows and his knees. She must not break free. He smiled as he conquered, for there was an ecstasy in the conquest, and a deeper ecstasy—deep down in the dark midst of his being—in the killing. This, then,

was the thing that should happen ; and on the whole it seemed good ; good since she could never be anyone else's now ; good since it was bringing slowly together again the broken parts of his brain.

XIV

SHE was dead. Fay lay dead. A few minutes ago she had been in this world ; now she was not in this world any more. She was not in this room. Strange that he could feel hardly anything. Stunned, yes ; a little shaken, yes ; but not much more. No doubt when this anæsthesia had passed, the awful revelation of what he had done would come like a light to strike him down ; but for the present he could only stand and shake a little. Her face was still under the white pillow, and he dared not uncover it yet. " Oh, Fay, Fay, my Fay, I loved you. I did really, my dear." One of her knees was drawn up, and he drew it gently down and laid it beside the other, and smoothed the crumpled blue silk that covered it. He looked at her bare feet, but dared not touch them.

And he just stood there, with an interdict resting on his thought and his feeling. When would the knowledge and the agony break through ? And would it gradually perish from him, this insistent thought that it had been the only thing to do—that it had done itself—that he could no more have stopped it than a man can control a retort if he is called a foul name, or a defensive and vindictive blow if he is unjustly struck—

His heart bounded with fright. A door had opened downstairs. Voices were speaking in the hall. Motionless, his eyes on his own door, his ears straining, he listened.

" I shan't be a minute," Mrs. Houseman was saying. " I'll go and see. . . . Oh, *look* at that mess. Someone's been and brought mud in. Someone's not wiped his feet as he come in. I do wish people'd show a little consideration sometimes. Just because it's not their own house they don't care what they do to it. I clean and I clean up after 'em. For two pins I'd put up a notice, ' Please wipe your feet as you come in.' Then, p'raps, they'd realize we like the place kep' nice."

" I don't know where anyone found mud to-night." Mr. Houseman coughed and cleared his throat. " The streets are bone-dry."

" It was raining a bit, earlier."

" Yes, but how much ? Spotting, that's all. Not enough to damp the pavements, hardly."

" We don't know what it's been doing elsewhere. If there's mud anywhere, they'll find it and bring it in. Trust *them*."

"Damn this key. It's always jamming." Mr. Houseman cleared his throat again, and loudly, raucously, continuously, as if his pipe were in his mouth, and the smoke had fouled his gullet and unloosed an irritant phlegm. "Heigh-ho, heigh-ho."

"Don't wake the house up."

"Go on! It's not as late as all that."

"It's long after twelve. I expect they're all in bed now. You go in. I shan't be a minute."

Had they heard Fay's scream? Had they discussed it together in their room, and was Mrs. Houseman now listening on the stairs? Would she perhaps come closer and listen outside the door?

At once the ingenuity born of fear whispered to him to speak. To laugh lightly. To speak softly and laugh lightly so that listening ears might hear him and be satisfied. "That's all right," he said to the dead body of Fay, where it lay quiescent and hushed on the bed. "Don't worry, my dear. Ha, ha; but fancy your thinking that, little silly. Are you going to sleep now? All right: sleep well, my heart. Gee, but I'm tired too, and could do with a nice long sleep." And he yawned loudly for any listening ears to hear. "I've had a rotten day, and I don't know that I've ever felt so tired."

But while he was speaking, a door shut. The front door. No mistaking the shutting of a front door. And Mr. Houseman's steps passed into the bedroom at the front, just as his wife's came tapping back from the room behind. Then they had not been in their bedroom all the time. They had been out together somewhere, and had only now returned. Listen: Mrs. Houseman was speaking again.

"No, it's all right. I coulda swore I left it burning. The tricks your memory plays you, you'd never believe. But I didn't. Apparently I didn't."

"Well, thank the Lord for that. Gas wasting for four blinkin' hours is no joke. Come on, then, old girl. Let's—"

The bedroom door shut on them, and he heard no more.

He glanced at his watch. Still only twenty-eight minutes past midnight. If he remained quite still, he would hear the Town Hall ring the half-hour. He waited, and it seemed as if the clock had missed its chiming, so long the wait; and yet the imperative idea was with him that he must hear it before he could be free to move.

At last. Did any of the Muswells hear those chimes on Brixton Hill, or were they all asleep? How little they knew that Fay was lying there, and that he was standing at her side like this, with his life dead in him, though his body was alive. Gilly in his bed in the front room; Belle in her bed at the back. . . .

Now all was quiet in the house. Silence above him and below

him. The house was as quiet as any of its tall neighbours in the long grey terrace. And all the gardens behind the long terrace were asleep.

Slowly, apologetically, he sat himself on the edge of the bed, and slowly, lifelessly, turned his head to look at Fay. Her still form in its blue silk sleeping suit, with the pillow still hiding her face, lay at a slight angle on the rumpled blanket: soon he would lay her straight, and smooth the blanket around her, and put a pillow under her head, and cover her gently as far as the shoulders. He stole a hand towards one of hers, and touched it. He slid his palm under her hand, and grasped it. And he tried to feel all he should, but he could not. "Fay, my dear, I loved you. You—you are dead. Dead. . . . I shall never hear your voice again, never see your eyes laughing into mine, never feel your arms around my neck or your lips on my cheek. In a little while I shall have gone, and than I shall never, never, see anything of you again. Never, and I can't quite realize it yet. . . . I dunno how it happened, I dunno. . . . I suppose I shall have to leave you soon. Is it possible that I shall meet you again in some other world? Oh, Fay, is it possible? I should like to think it. Fay, shall I find you again somewhere? And shall we ever be together again?"

Sitting there, holding her hand, he tried to think, since he could not feel. What was he to do? Soon he would have to go from this room. Not to escape arrest, but to escape realization. He wanted to suffer the realization that he had lost her for ever, but not, oh *not* the realization that he had killed her—not the memory of what he had done, and how he had done it. He would have to run from this room to escape the sight of Fay lying there and the merciless realization that would come through the eyes. He would be flying from that only—not from what lurked for him in the future, but from what lay behind him in the past. They would hunt him, and they would arrest him, and they would lead him to prison, but for the present he could not interest himself in this. It was a very small rock in the desert of his despair.

"In an hour or two I shall have to go, Fay. And then I shall never see you any more. Never, never. It's over, and for ever. Not in all eternity shall I see you again—or shall I? I dunno, I dunno. . . ."

Not for one hour, nor for the larger part of two, did he go, because he could not say good-bye. He withdrew his hand from hers, and sat with his elbows on his knees and his hands clasped or fingering each other. The room chilled, and he shivered. Once he rose wearily and went and shut the window, and put on his overcoat, so cold had the room become, now that midnight was nearly two hours gone. And in his overcoat he sat on the bed again, and, resting his elbows on his knees, stared at nothing,

while the fingers of one hand pulled and pressed the fingers of the other. Many times he turned his head and looked at Fay; then brought his eyes away. He heard, and did not hear, the sounds of the night: the approach and diminuendo of trains on the viaducts, and their long whistle as they wormed their way into the remote silence; the shunting of goods trains at a junction far away; the rhythmic and diminishing beat of footsteps on a pavement, as a solitary pedestrian hurried up one of the side streets; a crash of iron in a backyard below, as a prowling cat overturned a dustbin lid; and the intermittent barking of a dog—intermittent, but monotonously regular, and faintly suggestive of disquiet—as if the animal had awakened from sleep to scent that there was something amiss in the night.

It was when the Town Hall clock struck two that Roddy arose. With an effort, and a heavy sigh, he stood up, and for a minute paused, looking at his fingers. Then he turned and looked at Fay. He must do his last office for her now. He gathered his courage, for he knew that a great pain was coming to him; and when he was ready to take it, he lifted the pillow from her face. Yes, it was tinged with blue, especially at the cheekbones and the lips, but God was merciful to him: the discoloration was pale and hardly disfigured her at all, and her eyes were closed. Gently he lifted her a little higher up the bed, and laid her body straight, smoothing the blue silk sleeping suit over her breast and limbs. He raised her head, and set the pillow beneath it comfortably—the clean, untroubled pillow; not the one he had used. Her hair he smoothed with his hands. He picked up her arms by their wrists and laid them crosswise on her breast, straightening and joining the fingers of each hand, that it might rest, a long white oval, on the blue. And from the bed's foot he took the coverlet—that white cotton coverlet stamped with sprigs of blue flowers whose colour was nearly gone—and spread it over her as far as her chin, because he could not bear to cover her face. And he tried to smooth out its every wrinkle, even those at the side of the bed.

All this must convict him of murder, as he saw; but what did that matter? Oh, it was of small importance, that, compared with the discharge of this last office for Fay. It hardly interested him at all.

"There, darling. I can do no more. Good-bye, my dear."

And, bending down, he kissed her forehead. And this was the first great stab of realization: a stab that was almost too hard to bear. For her brow was cold; ice-cold; and it was as dead to his lips as marble; as unyielding as clean, burnished stone; and yet it still held the scent of freesia powder, her own sweet, powdery smell. A groan moaned through his lips, and he knew

that he wanted to die, because he could not live with what he had done. Unable to kiss her face again, he kissed passionately the shape of her hands beneath the coverlet, and the little shallow peak further down which was her feet ; and then went from the room and everything in it, swaying as he crept down the stairs.

XV

LIKE water down a worn channel his slack will took him along Brixton Road and through Kennington and into Vauxhall. He walked on and on, along the familiar ways, with no clear view of a destination—which, though he did not perceive this, was a parable of his whole life, since he had never had a clear view of a destination other than love, whether the love of a wife or the love of admiring audiences ; and such a goal, because of what he was, because he was what the world had made of him, and what he had made of himself, was nowhere to be found by him.

Round Kennington Oval he went, and along Vauxhall Street and Kennington Lane ; and there on his right were Tyers Street and Auckland Street and Goding Street : the streets that lay like sepulchral slabs over the old gardens. Their few lamps gleamed in their empty vistas—sole and poor posterity of the myriad illuminations that gleamed for the pleasure-seekers long ago—but Roddy hardly saw them, for he walked quickly past the mouths of these streets, nor dared to glance up them, remembering that they were Fay's streets. He passed through the long tunnel beneath the viaduct, and, emerging into the broad circus of Bridgefoot, left the gate of his city behind him. Like Fay only a few days ago, when she hurried through the noontide to meet Lawrie, he was glad to cross over the bridge and put the river between himself and his own world.

In the world across the river he just wandered straight on along the broadest roads ; and Vauxhall Bridge Road led him into Grosvenor Place, and Grosvenor Place into Piccadilly. He was wandering " up west " now ; and he noticed a curious difference in the quality of the night, up here in these spacious and lordly streets. It was three in the morning, and it would be difficult to say that the silence which possessed the high mansions, and the blue stillness which lay over roadway and park, were less than the night-hush in the long streets of Kennington and Vauxhall ; and yet, intangible, indefinable, a quality, as of wakefulness somewhere, permeated the Piccadilly night. It was quiet, but it was not asleep. An aureole of ochre light arched over the sweep of buildings that closed the long avenue, and there was a pulsing in the light, as if a vibrant activity had its place beneath it. It was

like the light in the brain of a dreamer who is less than fully asleep. And out of that hidden activity, sometimes, came a big, blue private car, moving silkily and swiftly, or a lone taxi, forging along more slowly and humbly; and Roddy, wandering on, could see that these late-roving vehicles were carrying men in opera hats and ladies in ermine cloaks from their parties and night clubs and balls. And when the roadway was a streak of emptiness again, and his eyes were restored to the pavements, he observed that the dark forms of women still haunted the side streets stealthily, waiting in ambush for a homing reveller, or loitered in the shadows under the house walls, their eyes proffering him an invitation as he passed.

And of a sudden it came to him that "Lawrie" was a citizen of these stately streets, who chartered tables and rooms in West End hotels, and that he had never, after all, forced out of Fay his surname or his address. The man's bulging letter was in his pocket, but it had been written on the unstamped pages of a writing-block, with a humorous address on the top of the first page: "In the Office, In the Train, In the Home." Then fancy, fancy! He would never know the name or the likeness of the man who had crashed like a comet into his small world. Was he young or old, short or tall, fair or dark? The man was a shadow without shape; but for some reason Roddy pictured him as tall. He saw him as a man bigger, stronger, more powerful and more fascinating than himself.

His body was near exhaustion. The small of his back was aching, and the hinder parts of his thighs, and the joints of his knees. Sometimes his eyelids dropped as he walked. Sometimes a shiver quavered through him. If only he could find somewhere to sit; or, better, to lie down. Where was there a garden bench on which he could lie quite flat, with his hands on his breast, like...? But that would be cold. Knees and ankles would become frigid in the chilled air of the small hours. He must keep walking till a sun like yesterday's brought warmth back to the earth, and then he could lie down somewhere, and try to sleep.

Lawrie. Anyhow, he had defeated that man. He had taught him something. In an hour or two this Lawrie would know that a strong man, even though poor, allowed no skulking, well-dressed, west-end cur to filch his wife from him. Roddy's mouth straightened vindictively as he thought this; and faintly among his faint emotions, pale as the dawn-light which must soon flush the sapphire sky, glimmered a pride in his victory and his strength.

"Good night, darling."

He turned his face. A woman standing in the sheltered darkness of a street corner had spoken to him.

"Good night."

"Don't you want a friend?"

Without answer he walked on.

"Going for a walk, dearie?" The voice was behind him: she was trailing after him, one pace behind, like an inquisitive and friendly dog.

"Perhaps."

"Yes, it's a nice night for a walk. Don't you want a little friend with you?"

He cast a sidelong glance at her. Slim, but not young. The powder and paint and peroxidized hair could not hide the sagging contours of the face or the drying skin of the neck. Forty, he guessed. But very stylishly dressed, so that she seemed of a different company from the drab women who stood for hire, holding their vanity bags before their stomachs, by the broadways of South London. Silky black frock with white reliefs; small hat with eyebrow veil; silver fur drooping from one shoulder—and yet the voice that came from this smartness was whining and common, so that he was moved to pity, even in his own despair, by the contrast between her voice and her clothes.

"Well, what do you think of me, now that you've had a look, eh? Oh, I don't mind. Don't think that I mind. We got to be looked over, I suppose. But you're out late, ducky. Been at work, or something?"

"No."

"Been to a show of some sort?"

"No."

"Just out walking, like?"

"Yes."

"I thought so. You don't look the kind that works at night, and you aren't dressed for the party, are you? I know: you've just come to have a look at us naughty girls, perhaps?"

"No, I haven't."

"Well, some young fellows do. Just come along to look at us and snigger. Looking's cheap, and they get some kinda kick out of it, I suppose. And not the young ones only, not by any means. The old men are just as bad, only they pretend to be looking at anything but us, the sly old devils! You're a bit worried, aren't you?"

"Perhaps. . . . If you like. . . ."

"Well, don't worry, darling. It'll be all the same a hundred years hence. Why not come for a little walk with me?"

As she walked at his side, he had seen her eyes appraising him, and had guessed her thought. He was no great catch, but after hours of disappointment, after hours of proffering herself to men

who passed her by, any issue to a night of striving was better than none.

"Yes, *come* along, ducky," she begged.

"You can walk with me, if you like."

"That's right. And now we'll both cheer up." And she slipped her arm into his. He shivered, remembering Fay's arm there; and only the desire not to hurt her saved him from unlinking his arm. He never wanted to hurt anyone any more. So sure was he of this that he brought his other hand across and touched hers gently.

"That's right," she laughed, pressing his arm against her side. "That's friendly. Now we're getting on fine. Are you coming home with me, ducky? I got a nice little place."

"I don't know about that."

Would she let him go with her just for companionship, he wondered. Would she let him lie still and rest; just lie still, with a fellow creature at his side? He wouldn't mind if she caressed him with her hands as he lay still. No, he would even like it; he would like the comfort of a woman's hands. And the longer he thought of this rest in a warm bed, with kindly hands to comfort him, the stronger grew its invitation to his tired body and defeated brain.

From the dark heart of despair one runs always to mother or to wife, but Roddy had none to go to.

This was all he could find.

"Come on," she coaxed. "I'll give you a good time."

"Listen, dear," he said; and his own word, "dear" surprised him: he seemed to have grown twenty years older since yesterday. "I don't want a good time. I don't want—I'm afraid I don't want anyone just now in the way you think. I've been through—well, never mind what—I been through hell, if you like, and let's leave it at that. But I'm just about done in, and very lonely. I guess I'd like to lie down somewhere, and kind of rest, see, with somebody near." As he said this, he patted her hand, so that she should not be hurt. "And I'd—I'd pay just the same, see. I'd give you half a quid."

"I generally get a whole quid, and sometimes more. I never done it for half a quid."

Immediately he was hurt that she should realize so little the dignity of his pain.

"All right, then," he sighed; and his arm moved to detach itself from hers, but instantly the crying need not to hurt anyone any more, or not to hurt too much, stayed the movement, and held his elbow at his side. "Let's leave it, my dear. I can find somewhere else to go. I haven't any more money, and I'm not sure that I really want to be with anyone, anyhow."

"No, don't be silly, darling. Don't be huffy." Oh, why did she sound like Fay? Why did all women sound like one another, sometimes? "I naturally got to think of myself a little, but if you're not one of the world's wealthiest, well, never mind: that's O.K. by me. So snap out of it, love, and let's be properly friendly. I like you. I like you a lot, see. I think you're a reely nice boy, and I don't want you to be unhappy and down, like you are. It's a shame; it is, reely. So come along. I guess we're both a bit tired. I don't mind telling you that I been walking or standing about for the best part of six hours, and my feet are done in. Absolutely done in. Just you traipse about in patent shoes like these for six bloody hours, and you'll know what swollen feet can be. My feet 'a' been feeling as if they were on fire for the last couple 'a hours. My, I shall be glad to kick these darned shoes off."

Again he was hurt: hurt that she should treat thus carelessly the high tragedy at which he had hinted, and be more interested in her own little pain. Death was waiting for him somewhere, and his heart was already dead; and yet she could mention her aching feet in the same breath with his royal despair. It was now, before this audience of one, and in this dark avenue where the rich and famous lived, that he felt the first stirrings of pride in his high tragedy.

She must appreciate it more.

"Where are we going to? Not that it matters much to me where I go now. It can't make any difference. I don't feel as if anything will ever matter any more."

He felt her sudden, quick glance at him, and knew that it was charged with surprise. It was resting on his cheek. "Why, Gawd, ducks, what on earth's happened? My, I didn't realize you were feeling as badly as all that. What is it, dear? Tell me. You'll feel better after you've told it to someone, and it'll be safe as houses with me."

"Oh no. No, it's not a thing I'm telling to anyone living. No one'd understand if I did. No one could possibly understand, ever. But all I know is I want to get a little rest before to-morrow. Anything may happen to-morrow."

"Have you got across the cops?"

"Ha! Got across the cops! That's good. That makes me laugh. Perhaps I have, and perhaps I haven't. Not that I care a tinker's damn whether I have or I haven't. I'm past worrying about that."

"Is it something they could put you away for?"

"Put away! Put away! Ha, 'put away' is good." His pride was growing, and he was talking wildly. "Yes, I dare say 'put away' is the right word. I like 'put away.' And I don't

mind telling you that I wish to God some kind person'd come along and put me away quickly. That'd be far and away the best solution of everything. . . . Far and away. . . . Far and away. . . ."

"Christ, you haven't done someone in, have you?"

"No." Fear bade him recover his sanity again, and take care. "No, I don't do people in. I guess I'm not a murderer. I guess I should have to hate people more than I've ever been able to, before I started murdering them. It's a pretty big thing to take anyone's life from them, if you come to think of it. . . . Yes. . . . They've only got one life, all said and done. . . . Do I look like a murderer?" He turned his face and smiled at her. "I hope not."

"No, my dear. *That* you don't."

"Well, I'm glad of that. And you mustn't mind all I'm saying. I guess I'm just about off my head with trouble, and that's all there is to it. It's nothing to worry you about, but it's a bit of a relief to talk wildly to someone."

Her hand felt for his hand, and her fingers twined themselves in his, comfortingly. "Of course it is; and listen, my love, I'm sorry for you; oh, I am, *reely*, if you're feeling like that. I know what it is to feel like that; don't I just? And whatever you done, or haven't done, I know you're not the wrong type. You don't *look* like it, see. You just don't begin to look like it. Take my word for it: if you done something wrong, it wasn't all your fault. And don't think *I* have any use for the cops, because I haven't. Once or twice you strike a real gentleman among 'em, and he's a good pal to you, but, take 'em as a whole, I've no use for 'em, not in twenty years. And I bet that goes for every girl about here. If it's you or the cops, I know whose side I'm on every time. You come home with me, and I'll do all I can for you, dear."

"It's nice of you. Where's this place of yours?"

"Just off Coventry Street."

"Where's that?"

"Gawd! How far've you come? Don't you know Coventry Street? We're going towards it now."

They crossed Piccadilly Circus, and turned up Rupert Street, and turned again. They halted at a door beside a shop front, while she fingered in her bag for a key. In other days he would have trembled with embarrassment to be standing with her by that narrow door, but nothing mattered now. He cared only to lie down somewhere, and shut his eyes, and not be quite alone. He followed her up a dark staircase, steep and narrow, and into a room at the back.

She switched on a light, and it created out of the darkness a

small square room, with a double bed against the right-hand wall, a small oval table at the bed's foot, a shilling-in-the-slot gas fire in the grate, and curtains drawn across the recesses, left and right of the chimney-piece, to hide her hanging clothes. As with her voice and language, so with her room: it was in pitiable contrast with her stylish dress and patent leather shoes. And pitiable, too, the uncleared meal upon the table: a teapot, a tea cup, a torn tin of herrings-in-tomato-sauce, a loaf, and the fragments of a piece of toast on a plate. And a novel that told some happy love story lying open by her plate.

"Sorry if things aren't as tidy as they might be, but I was a bit pushed for time to-night. Sit down a bit; sit here, see. I can see you're tired out. My, you're as pale as death; you are, reely."

"I'll sit here." And he sat glumly on the edge of the bed—and straightway remembered the last bed on which he had sat. Oh, come death, come death; come soon. Fay lying on that other bed—but no, don't think of her.

"Oh well," he sighed; and, getting up, threw off coat and waistcoat.

"That's right. You lay down. I shan't be a jiffy."

Ashamed of being seen in his underclothes, he got quickly into the bed and lay there, while she undressed as far as her brassière and knickers.

"Want the light on?"

"No."

"No. I suppose not. I forgot. O.K., then. Anything you like."

Skipping to the switch on naked feet, she snapped out the light; and, a second later, he felt her sliding in beside him.

She drew his head against her breast and stroked his hair. "Never mind, dear, never mind. Come as close as you like, and just lie as still as you like. There. You *are* down, aren't you, my pet? Why don't you have a good cry? It does you ever so good; and I shan't think any the worse of you, see. I rather like men who can cry sometimes. It shows they got a heart. You just lie there and cry, see, and you'll feel better afterwards. Are you quite comfortable like that? That's right. I'm so glad. I'm so glad."

No tears came from Roddy in the darkness, though she stroked his head and his lifeless arm, and once kissed his brow. Never, he thought, would he be able to weep again.

"Things'll come all right, ducky. They always do. Nothing's so bad that it doesn't come right sooner or later. That's always my comfort when I'm thoroughly down: I tell myself to buck up because, if I'm having a bad go now, the next one's bound to be good. Things happen like that. Pain doesn't last any more than happiness does; they come in turns, one after the other,

like ; they come in waves, up and down, up and down . . . You're down now, so, you see, there a good time coming. Now you just look ahead to the good time that's coming. It's coming to you all right ; it's coming as sure as fate. It always does. And that's why I believe in Gawd, reely ; because it's so clear to me that He never lets anyone suffer too much ; never more than they can. He always sends them their bit of peace."

"There's no God anywhere. No one to hear you, or to care."

"Oh yes, there is, my dear. I just feel sure of it, somehow. Sometimes it's seemed to me like as if He'd gone out of His way to help me, if I was reely *properly* down. I remember once—shall I tell you a funny little thing that happened once ?"

"Yes."

"Well, I was down—I never been so down—I'd just about lost all faith in Gawd, and all hope of happiness any more, and I got into a bus to come home and do myself in with the gas or something, and as I sat in the bus, all of a sudden I saw staring me in the face, right in front of me, pasted up on the window, a text ; and it said, 'He maketh sore, and bindeth up : He woundeth, and His hands make whole.' And I just knew that He meant me to see it ; that He kind of spoke it to me before it was too late. And that it was the simple truth, all said and done. So now I always say those words when I'm down, see ; always. *You* say them, my pet : 'He maketh sore, and bindeth up : He woundeth, and His hands make whole'."

"They're not for me. Not for me."

"Oh yes, they are, my love. They're for everyone. For you more than anyone, just now. Perhaps He meant me to say them to you to-night, see. Perhaps He's saying them to you now, same as He said them to me in that there bus. And they're just the truth, my dear : the simple truth that never fails. After pain comes peace. Always, see."

§

He suffered her fondling for a little. Indeed the warmth of her flattened breast, the strokings of her hand, and the crooning caress in her voice, comforted him a little ; not greatly, but a little.

But after a while, since he did not respond at all, but lay lifeless, she drew away from him ; and he, rather than hurt her, felt for her hand and held it. And, holding it, he did not want to let it go. It was a frail contact with his kind again. And so he held it and lay there, eyes closed, but wakeful. After a time he knew that she was asleep, and he withdrew his hand gently. Once he folded

his hands over his breast and lay like Fay, and wished that he were in as deep a sleep as she.

Sleep, sleep.

And the night passed over him, while the traffic moaned outside. Stormy dreams tossed over the deep stream-bed of his mind, waking him once to see the twilight of dawn in the room. Then he must have slept again, for he woke to see the sunlight there. And the cheap tin clock on the mantelpiece ticking loudly towards nine 'oclock.

The punctual and unforgiving sun was shining upon London. It was shining upon Old Lane and upon Brixton Hill. It had called Mrs. Muswell and Uncle Vic and Gilly and Belle to the strangest day of their lives. It had called Mrs. Houseman, and busied her about her cleansing chores, so that not for some time, perhaps, would she notice the silence in the room above. It had called the man Lawrie in his unknown home and stirred him with hope of a letter from his love. And it had called the police from their beds, and assembled them in Brixton Police Station for the tasks and sudden urgencies of the day.

Roddy turned to look at the woman. Tired out, she was still asleep. Her mouth was open, and her face was red and puffed and a ruin. He slipped secretly from the bed, thinking to dress and steal from the room, after laying his payment on the table.

But she stirred and woke. She blinked her eyes, and remembered something, but not all.

"Going?" she yawned. "Oh dear, oh dear . . . I feel as if I'd been thrashed all over. I got an aching right acrost my shoulders and in the pit of my back. It's all that standing. Oh dear. . . ." Yes, she could wake to no more pain than this. "Why hurry away, my heart?"

"I must."

"Did you sleep a-tall, darling?"

"Not much."

"Well, I did. Whacked to the wide I was. Sorry you didn't, but I'll make you a nice cuppa tea, shall I?"

"That'd be fine."

"And you can have a wash here if you like. It'll freshen you up a bit."

She slid from the bed, and slipped on a kimono. Picking up the kettle from the grate, she went out for water. Returning, she set the kettle on the trivet and arranged the tea things on the table. "I got some biscuits, but they're a bit dry, I'm afraid. I'll make you a nice piece of toast, if you like."

"No, thanks. I shall enjoy the tea, but I don't feel like eating."

"O.K."

Oh, but she must remember. More, she must realize the grand background against which he stood: the august background of death. All the while, as she worked and he dressed, he was selecting and tasting sentences that would evoke the grandeur for her, however vaguely, and rejecting them. In the sombre majesty of his position this morning lay his only comfort. A wound in his nature, never before ministered to, was being oddly anointed and dressed. He was famous at last; he had forced the world to hear of him. He was big at last, if only in disaster.

"Feel a bit easier this morning, ducks?"

"I think so."

"That's right. As I said, nothing goes on for ever. After a spot of pain there always comes a spot of peace. There you are, dear. Sit down and drink this. I shan't want much more than a drink of tea, either."

A spot of pain! Peace! Peace, yes; but only in death. She must understand. She must be given the grandeur of the man who sat at her table drinking tea with her. Behind his silence he shaped his sentences; and when he rose, he spoke.

"I must be going now. Thank you so much for everything. I must be off, and quickly; though where to, God knows; but I suppose things'll solve themselves somehow. I can't explain to you, my dear, but I don't mind telling you that all England'll know about me in a few hours."

"Gawd! What do you mean?" She was staring into his face; and it pleased him. "Have you done something *reely* awful?"

He nodded sadly. "'Fraid so. I don't know how it happened. I shall never know. . . ."

"Not *killed* someone?"

"Don't ask me for details. I don't know, I don't know what happened. . . ."

She got up and put her fingers on his elbow, compassionately. "Oh, my dear, I understand. Listen: I'm sure that, whatever you done, you didn't mean to do it. Things do just happen of theirselves, like, sometimes. And listen: Gawd'll understand that, same as I do; even if no one else does. And I'll tell you one thing you can be sure of: I shan't never give you away. Gawd, I only wish I coulda done more to help you. Is there anything I can still do? I'm on your side, see."

"You can't do anything. No one can. But, darling"—the word slipped from him—"I'm frightfully grateful for last night. I am, really."

"Tell me what you done. Tell me all."

"No, I can't do that. Among other things, it wouldn't be fair to you, I reckon, in case . . ."

"Well, tell me your name."

"My name? Why do you want to know that?"

"Well. . . ."

And, looking straight into her eyes, he saw. He saw that even she, though her sympathy was real and full, could look for a pleasurable thrill in the day's excitement. She wanted the name of this man who had come to her in the night, if it was to be a great and famous name before another evening fell. And who could blame her? Not he: it was natural enough. And because she had been kind to him, he gave her this small reward.

"My name is Roddy Stewart."

"Roddy . . . Roddy Stewart. . . . Well, I shall be wishing you well, my dear. Nothing'll make me believe you're a bad man. I know a bad man when I see one, and you're not one of 'em. The best of us come a cropper sometimes, so just you go on believing in yourself, see."

"Thank you." From his wallet he took out his ten shilling note, and handed it to her.

"No, dear, I don't like to take that," she protested; but he saw that her eyes longed for it. "No, I can do without that. You didn't have anything, and Christ, anyone'll share their bed with anyone who's tired out like what you were. You keep it; you'll need it, I guess."

"That's where you're wrong. I'm pretty sure you'll need it more than I shall. Take it. I shan't be happy if you don't."

"I don't like to. . . ."

"Come on. Take it, and give me a *little* happiness, somewhere."

She took it, hesitating. "No, I don't like it. I don't like taking it from you. Honest to Gawd, I don't want it, if you really think you'll need it." But the hand that offered it back was loth to part with it.

"I don't need anything, and I got some more. And I want to pay for my board and lodging, see. I reckon it may be the last I have to pay for."

"All right, then."

Keeping the note, she put her arms around him, drew him to her, and kissed him. It was for her a moment of vision, fogged, inadequate, incomplete, but real. In her moment of vision she saw the dignity of suffering, and felt her unity in the invisible realms of love with this other human creature who had come to her out of the night, and held her hand for a little. And her kiss was her poor, stumbling statement of what she had seen.

It was so tender a kiss that he kissed her on the lips in gratitude, though the touch of her lips pierced him with the memory of other kisses he had known.

" Good-bye ; and thank you."

" Good-bye ; and good luck, see. Good luck, all the way."

" Thank you, my dear."

Without asking her name he went out. Indifferent to what the day might do, he gave himself to the desire in his feet ; and they led him inevitably homeward to the southern bank and his own city.

XVI

IN the way of self-torment, idly seeking new frontiers of pain, he came to the Old English Garden in Kennington Park. Here he used to sit with Fay in the first days of their courting ; and here he would sit now, and look at the flowers. He could not sit in the seat which had been theirs, to the right of the pergola, but went and sat in one of the crescent-shaped seats embraced by yew hedges, and dropped into it, and sat staring at the pergola and the flowers.

There were no children in the garden, for it was after ten, and they were at school. There were no young people, for they were at work and their dinner hour was not yet. Only the old were sitting here now. Alone on their seats the old men sat among the scarlet geraniums, meditating beneath blue clouds of tobacco smoke, or dozing in the sun. He looked at them, and thought that he would never be an old man, smoking in the sun. An ancient beldame, bunched like a heap of rags, sat by a bag of twigs and splinters that she had gleaned from the grass and the asphalt walks, so as to have a fire in her attic to-night. He looked at her, and thought that Fay would never be an old woman, sitting in a garden with her memories.

"Oh God, what have I done? I—I cancelled Fay's life." But shut a door on this thought ; shut and bolt it ; it is in a room one dare not visit. A bewildering pain, like madness, sits there.

A gardener of the London County Council, in his brown uniform and slouch hat, walked along the crazy paths, stabbing at litter with a pronged stick, and pulling it from the prong, and thrusting it into the trug on his arm. An unemployed man, with a choker round his neck, and a cigarette behind his ear, rambled up the path beneath the pergola and, after looking at the sundial, sank into the seat which the gossiping girls used to occupy long ago, in the days when Roddy would watch them munching their sandwiches and apples. A little blonde woman wheeled a perambulator to the seat by the lily pool, and sat beside the water for a few minutes of rest. The hunched old wood-gatherer dropped her chin into her rags and slept. And the old men sat on, their blue smoke lifting and floating away above their silence and their musing.

And the sun was a benison on all in the garden except him. All these had a right to the embrace and blessing of the sun; for him alone it was forfeit. Behold a stranger sitting in the garden.

The man in the seat beneath the pergola lit his cigarette and spread open a newspaper. Was there anything in that paper about—but no, of course not. That was a paper printed in the night. Soon, however . . . how soon would the newspapers speak? How soon would Mrs. Houseman remark the stillness above her head; how soon creep a little way up the stairs and listen; how soon knock at the door and call, "Mrs. Stewart, Mrs. Stewart, are you in?" and then open the door?

But the question had not interest enough to disturb his torpor. He was very tired, and his head, like the old crone's, dropped towards his breast; and gradually the murmuring traffic in Camberwell New Road lulled him to sleep. He slept. He slept before a curtain of sound: the rumbling of buses and the grinding of trams interweaving with the warning clamour of Klaxon horns, the dinning of tram-bells, and the low diapason of voices. His sleep was shot through with livid fears that startled his heart, but it persisted; and if he awoke for a moment and came to the surface of things, it was only to dive into sleep again.

§

Sometimes, or so men have believed, a man asleep in an old mansion or garden will recreate in his dreams the scenes of its past. The place, we say, is impregnated with the emotions suffered here, and a sleeper, because he is in a trance and receptive, may serve as a medium in which they can live again. Did Roddy do this? Who knows; for his dreams were lost as soon as he awoke? If he did, then Kennington Park changed into a lone, drear, ill-kempt common, fenced by wooden pales and crossed by black ditches. Wafted over its mangy waste came the smell of the vitriol factories on its eastern side. And the crowds assembled on the worn grass till they were a great multitude; and not of the poor only, for some of the men and women now lost in the multitude had stationed their coaches by the wooden paling or tethered their horses to its stakes. And from the centre of the shifting multitude rose the figure of the field preacher, his arm denouncing them as he cried, "Repent! Repent! You are the enemies of God, because you are resisting Love. You have love in your hearts, if only for a few, and that love is God in you, so it be a passion to give and not to take. But will you give it to more than a few? You will not. You resist its pressure in your heart lest it drive you forth from the

sins you love, lest it tear the warm selfishness you have wrapped around you, lest it cast you out from your house of comfort and carry you into lean places, and bid you walk there, naked and suffering and divine. You resist and constrain it, and clamp it in bands, lest it take you and break you and make you anew. You are terrified of it, terrified of it, lest it enable you to hear the cries you *will* not hear, and see the sores you *will* not see, and feel in your own heart the anguish of others that you long to forget. Oh, my children, my children, who have God striving in your hearts to make you divine, wherefore do you resist Him so? Come now, let us reason together. Have you love in your hearts? Yes: every one of you. Then, beloved and chosen of God, resist it no more. Repent, and let it increase and multiply in you; let it swell; let it swell, I say; let it expand; let it rend and break the frozen places of your heart, so that it is imprisoned no more, but is free to spread over all suffering men everywhere, and, aye, over the whole of our fallen creation which must continue to groan and travail till love has conquered all. You are the world's redeemers, and you will not redeem. Love is the hunger to redeem. To redeem the past of our brothers, and their present, so that they may not suffer to-morrow. But you will not do it; you turn from God, and the knowledge that is in you; you harden your hearts; and therefore, because of you, this man and that man shall suffer to-morrow. Men still unborn are awaiting their pains, because you have slain for your own peace the redeemer in your hearts, and will not let him rise again. But not so shall you find peace. So you shall find only loneliness and increasing loss, and a misery of remorse in the last day. With Love alone is peace. With Him is struggle and strain and suffering, and ineffable peace. Harken to what the old pagan philosopher said, when the everlasting Christ was speaking in him, hundreds of years before Christ was born: 'Love is the desire for what we are not and have not, but need to be and to have. Therefore Love is always poor; not sweet and comely, as people think, but lean and gaunt; he is shoeless and homeless; he lies on the bare earth without a bed, and sleeps in the open air on doorsteps and in the street, dwelling ever with want. But with him alone is peace.'

The field preacher's name is manifold: it is Whitfield; it is Wesley; it is Fox; and smaller names that only God remembers.

Across the Camberwell New Road, five hundred paces from where Roddy sleeps, and surrounded by broad rivers of traffic, is an island of silence, where tilting tombstones stand around a dark Doric church. The cupola of the church, like a Trinity light on an island in the midst of the tideway, salutes the traffic of five roads swirling around it from Camberwell, Brixton, Clapham,

Southwark and Vauxhall. Is Roddy dreaming aright? If so, that railed churchyard changes into a corner of old Kennington Common, and the Effra river skirts its side. And on a low mound in the centre of it stands a gallows. It becomes again the Tyburn of South London, which people know as Hangman's Green. And along the road from Southwark, where the gaol is, and past the wooden pales of the common, comes a running and jeering rabble, their eyes and their derisive shouts turned towards eight men dragged on hurdles to their execution on Hangman's Green. The horses and hurdles reach the green, and the rabble packs itself around the gallows for the show, and the wit flies from mouth to mouth, and the lust to punish is loud in men's voices and alight in their eyes. Is it the scaffold, perchance, that starts the livid fears in Roddy's dreams? Or is it the mob that shivers him? Vain was the voice of the field preacher, who cried across the common less than a decade ago; for here is the lust to destroy, not the love to redeem. These eight for the gallows are men who have risen against the King's peace on behalf of the King over the water, and one of them, at the scaffold's foot, lifts a glass to the exiled King. The crowd roars for retribution to be done on him. Let him have the traitor's meed. A fire is lit, and its smoke rises above the gaping mob, and above the cross-bar of the gallows-tree. They hang each man in his turn, but after three minutes cut him down, that they may disembowel and behead him. The executioner throws bowels and heart into the fire, and body and head into a coffin. Women swoon, and one of them, a young girl, drops dead upon the green, for she is the lover of the last lad to hang, and has accompanied him all the way to Golgotha. As the axe falls, her heart snaps, and she dies with him; for sometimes there is a mercy at the heart of things which cries, "Enough." The executioner throws his heart, the last heart, into the fire, and, since his work is done, cries "God save King George." And the mob, its righteous indignation slaked, its lynching appetite appeased, lets loose the answering shout, "God save the King"; then slowly scatters over the common to its homes. The King's Peace is avenged.

Roddy starts in his sleep, but no one will know if it was of this that he was dreaming.

§

Roddy awoke; and the sun was dipping over Vauxhall. It must be afternoon. His body was stiff and aching, his feet were swollen and hot, and his underclothes, which had not been removed

all night, felt close and dry. His mind asked nothing, but his body now had a tongue of its own and begged, not food, but immersion. To lie in a bath. And no sooner had his body uttered its want than it craved it as a drunkard his drink.

He dragged himself up. Let him walk but a few hundred yards, and he would come to the Lambeth Public Baths and Wash-houses, an ornate, red-brick municipal edifice at the corner of Kennington and Lambeth Roads. He limped there on swollen feet.

Now, when Roddy reached the doorway of the Gentlemen's Slipper Baths, he could turn to right or left of the pay box. If he turned to the left, he paid twopence, and passed into the Second Class Baths with a single towel in his hand. If he turned to the right, he paid sixpence and took two towels, very clean but rather grey, and went into the First Class Baths. He turned to the right, prompted by some vague notion that he had acquired the right to be "first class" for once in his life.

He walked along a cold bare corridor which immediately reminded him of passages in Brixton Prison, such as he had seen when he went to visit Bob Every. And he felt the first touch of the fingers of claustrophobia, clutching at his heart. God, he would scream if they were to shut him in behind immovable walls. He would dash his head against the bricks, if he were walled up somewhere where no one could hear his shouting. He would go racking mad. So sickening was the message of these walls that it nearly drove him out of the building into the open world whose only walls were the sky.

But he threw off the fear, and walked on with his towels.

The corridor brought him to a bright hall, lit by skylights, and with a walled passage up its centre on to which opened the doors of the bathrooms. Again the likeness to a prison, though a clean and airy one. It differed from a prison in this alone, that the doors stood open, and the walls of the bath cells were truncated at eight feet high: they were cold brick cubicles rather than cells. Steam rose from one that was occupied, and the sound of splashing; the steam diffused itself in the afternoon light that seeped through the windows in the roof, which light itself seemed heated by the glass; so that a warm breath greeted Roddy, like the warm, clean breath of a laundry.

An attendant, grey-moustached, and wearing a white coat, showed him into a cubicle, and turned on the water from a lock outside, as a turnkey might. The water could not be controlled from within. Did they do the same in a prison? How many baths did one have before they . . .

"That all right for you, sir?"

"Yes, thanks. That's grand."

The grey-moustached attendant, satisfied that Roddy was content with the quantity and temperature of the water, withdrew from the room and shut the door on him.

And Roddy looked around his clean white cell. He pretended that he was in prison. All his life he had played this game, and now . . . now let him play it with more vivid imagination than ever before. Strange that he should have walked into such a perfect stage-set: cold floor and walls, a single chair, a wooden shelf with brush and broken comb, and a printed notice hanging on the door. . . . He sat on the hard chair, and rested his elbows on his knees, letting his hands droop down. He was in his first cell at Brixton Police Station, just as Pete Berry had been, and the footsteps of the free were passing along the pavement beneath his high, barred window. He was in his remand cell at Brixton Prison, only a little way from the Muswells' living room, where they sat and spoke of him. He was in his last cell at Wandsworth Prison, and it was five minutes to nine in the morning, and he was waiting for that door to open. . . .

"No." He rose from the chair, saying, "No." "No, I don't mind the executioner, I don't mind him hardly at all, but I couldn't stand the thick walls and the steel door pressing on me day after day and night after night. I should just go blind, foaming mad. I know I should. God, yes! Very well, then: if that is so, I can't give myself up. I just can't. I should like to, I think, were it possible; but it isn't. It just isn't the way for me."

Some other way, but what?

Where there is no answer one retires from thought. He undressed and got into the bath and lay there; and his body was comforted, if not his brain.

Steps and voices were coming along the white passage without. To judge from the voices, there were two men and a boy; and one of the men was of a jocular cast.

"Hallo, Hen!" he sang out to the grey-moustached attendant. "George, this is Henry. Arty, this is your Uncle Henry. How's things with you, Hen, and how are the chicks? Hen's got four chicks, George."

"Good afternoon, sir. All very well, thanks."

"Good. Well, Henry, this is George. He's staying with me. He's a gentleman of leisure. But he needs a bath. I mean to say, when a gentleman's staying with you, you soon know if he needs a bath or not; so I brought him along. And, between you and me, Hen, make it hot. This is my nipper. What do you think

I done to deserve that? Nine years old, and it's time he had a bath. Not many here to-day? Jesus, does *nobody* wash in these parts?"

"There's never many at this time, sir. You can have these three."

"O.K., Hen. Put the nipper in next to me, and George in the one beyond. Now then, George, do your duty."

"Funny fellow, isn't he?" commented George to the attendant.

Doors closed.

"All right, Arty?" called the jocular man over the wall.

"Yes, Dad."

"Wash yourself properly, mind. Wash behind your ears. In fact, wash behind everything. That's right, isn't it, George? You all right, old cock?" He had lifted his voice to carry one cell farther.

"Not half, Jack."

"Good." And Jack began to sing his own version of *The Umbrella Man*. "Any umber-ellas-ellas, any umber-ellas-ellas, any umber-ellas to-day?"

"Lay off, Jack!" called George.

"Rats! Gee—devil in chokey—but it's hot! *Phew!* Mr. Chairman and gentlemen, pray silence while I get used to it. . . . Here, Henry, it's too bloody hot. Give us a splash of cold. That'll do. *Woah*, that'll do. Ah, that's all right. Getting on all right, Arty?"

"Yes, Dad."

"Soap yourself all over. Get all you can out of the Council for a tanner, eh, Henry?"

"That's right, sir," said Henry from his passage.

"Still alive, George? Not gone down the plug-hole, have you? I don't seem to hear much from you. Arty, I don't believe he's washing himself properly, do you?"

"You'll make a joke if you're not careful," warned George.

"Ha, ha. Cynical devil, old George is. I forgot to tell you that, Henry."

Now the talk ceased for a while, giving place to splashing, humming, singing, or muttered cursing of an elusive piece of soap. A man came into the cell on the other side of Roddy, and, speedily and quietly undressing, stepped into his bath, and then the talkative man spoke again.

"George."

"Yes, Jack?"

"Where are we going after this?"

"Ask me another."

"Well, I know where *I'm* going. I'm going to look at the house where the murder's been."

"Where's the sense of that?"

"Oh, stow it! You aren't any different from me, and if there's been a murder, I just got to go and stand in the street and stare up at the house where it was done. I like to look at the window of the room where it happened, and to see the coppers fussing about and moving the people on. Henry, did you know there'd been a first-class murder last night?"

"No, sir. Where was it?"

The man in the cubicle on the other side of Roddy had stopped his splashing, and lay listening. Roddy splashed a little instead, feigning ease.

"In Old Lane. A young woman found smothered in her bed; and the comic thing is that her husband, who musta done it, laid her out as beautifully as if she was all he had in the world, folding her hands over her breast, and closing her eyes, and covering her up with a clean white counterpane, and smoothing out every wrinkle. She looked lovely, they say. The landlady, getting suspicious, like, at the silence, went up and saw her there, and nearly died of fright."

"Where's the husband, then, now?"

"Done a guy. Disappeared altogether. But fancy laying her out like that. Either a cynical sort of cove—like George—or—I dunno—I suppose he loved her in his way."

"Funny way to love anyone," called George.

"Oh, I dunno. I mean to say, I love young Arty, but I could cheerfully do him in sometimes. And I love you, George, and I could crack you on the nut—often I could. Lord help us, where *does* the soap get to? It's all in the papers, Henry. I got one to see the winners and prices, and found this splashed all over the front page instead."

"I never see any papers till the evening."

"Well, you can have mine if you like. Come and get it, if you like. Don't want it? Well, I don't care. It's on all the placards too."

"Will they find him, Dad?"

"Who?"

"The man who done it."

"Bet your life they will, sonny. May even have got him already. Every cop in England'll have got his description by now, and be looking for him."

"What's he like?"

"I forget. It give his description, but I forget. Young, I know; and dark or fair, or tall or short, or something. But old

Ginger Gowry'll get him. Divisional Detective Inspector Gowry always gets his man. And he'll be out to get this one, because they say that, one more of his famous knock-offs, and he'll be made a Superintendent, sure as eggs. Do you remember how he landed Scottie Duncan, George? A fine bit of work, that was. Combed all England, with the help of the Yard, and then ran him to earth at last working happily in a food factory in Southwark. Yes, old Gowry'll get him, even if he's five hundred miles away by now. I know Divisional Detective Inspector Gowry well, George."

"Why, what did he get you for, Jack?"

"Lummy: George has made a joke now. Hear that, Henry? I've met him socially more than once. A nice guy, even if he does look like a penn'orth of young carrots. And smart as hell. He'll have his hands on this lad in forty-eight hours, I shouldn't wonder."

"I should. One young man's extraordinarily like another."

"Come to think of it, that's true, George. One young man's awfully like another. As the bloke said when the copper arst him if he'd seen a Chinaman go by in Pennyfields, he said, 'Well, guv'nor, I either seen twenty Chinamen go by, or the same Chinaman twenty times.' And now shut up. How you do talk, George! I can't hardly hear myself wash."

"Where do you suppose he's gone, Dad?"

"Who? The murderer? They generally make for a port. But you can bet that every blinking port in the British Isles is being watched by now. And every station terminus too."

"Will he be hung?"

"'Fraid so, old boy. Yes, he'll swing. Well, anyone who says I'm not as sweet and clean, now, as a bride for her husband, is a liar. Ladies and gentlemen, I done."

"Do let's go and look at the house, Dad. Do let's."

"Now then, you shut up, yer morbid young rascal! You and your house! The coppers'll soon move you on, if they see you gaping up at the house. You and your do let's! Slosh some cold water over him, Henry."

Roddy was dressing fast. Not because he feared recognition: he could not believe that the attendant or the bathers would imagine that this young man emerging from a bathroom, his skin clean and his hair a-shine with water, was the murderer of whom they were speaking: one never did imagine such things. But because he must change these confining walls for the open sky; because in the open, away from voices, and with the air on his brows, he could think; and because—strong, strange impulse—he must go and feed on the placards which

published his fame to the world. Somewhere beneath his rending pity for Fay, and his dull, despairing remorse, the deathless egotism in him craved this pale satisfaction which had been granted it at last.

XVII

THE policy department at the offices of the Home and Dominions Insurance Company was a room long as a hospital ward, with windows down one side, and the manager's office behind a partition in the corner. Long tables at right angles to the walls stood one behind another down the length of the room, and at each table sat a clerk checking and passing the proposal forms of prospective policy holders. At smaller tables running parallel with the walls sat girls typing the details on the policy forms. It was three in the afternoon, and Lawrie sat at his table with a pile of proposals before him. There was also a folded newspaper before him. His face was nearly as grey as the documents on which his eyes rested with little sight. Sometimes, for form's sake, he read a proposal and passed it on to another pile, but more often he sat with his loosely clenched fists resting on the table and his eyes looking through the proposal forms at scenes and faces far away.

The words in the newspaper danced a macabre quadrille with the words in the proposal forms.

"The landlady, opening the door, which was not locked, saw the woman lying on the bed with her arms folded. . . . Industrial Branch. Own life. If proposed Assurance is on joint lives, particulars of each life should be given on separate forms. If a married woman, state husband's occupation. . . . The husband has not been seen by anyone since last night, and a large force of police is searching for him in the hope that he can throw some light on the mystery. . . . This afternoon a police guard was placed upon the house, and many photographs have been taken of the room. . . . Are there any policies now in force upon your life? . . . Divisional Detective Inspector Gowry, who is in charge of the investigations, said this morning, 'The cause of death is asphyxiation, with every evidence of foul play. We are searching for clues, and have little doubt that an arrest will soon be made.' Inspector Gowry has many celebrated captures to his credit, and the public can feel confident that he will sift this mystery to the bottom . . ."

Clues. Sift the mystery to the bottom. His letters: would they find any? Oh, she had destroyed his letters: didn't she say so one day? But that terrible letter of the day before yesterday,

composed here at this table? Yesterday he had been happy. Would they find that letter? And her husband, when they arrested him, would he tell all? Perhaps he had the letter with him now, and would show it to them as his extenuation. It would be read line by line in court before him, Lawrie, and he would be catechised about it, while the reporters scribbled hastily, or raced to the telephone, so that a fine lead-story might be given to the world. "Nothing has been heard of the husband." Oh, God grant that he escaped and was never heard of again . . .

Exposure. Exposure in this office. Lawrie glanced at the men clerks and the girl clerks, and at the manager's head bent over his desk behind his window. Shamed before them all. By to-morrow, perhaps: he who had walked as a privileged person among them! Shamed before all his neighbours on High Common. Shamed before the servants in the house. "Oh, what am I to do? Oh, my God, my God!"

Oh, there was pity for Fay, that beautiful, dark child—dead, dead!—and there was remorse—remorse that must lie in his memory for ever; but these had no strength in this hour to compete with his fear for himself. They must wait; they must wait outside. The deathless egotism was master. It kept the room to itself.

"Fay is dead, Fay is dead. Some day I shall realize it, but not now. I didn't mean to do this to you, Fay, I didn't, I didn't; I only meant to bring you happiness, and to get a little myself. I didn't take you till I felt you wanted me, and I cannot feel that I was wholly wrong. All the technically righteous will condemn me, I know, but they won't understand all, or even try to." Dead, and exposure for him. Ruin. Better never to have seen her than this. A year ago he had been happy. There had been no poignant sweetness in his life, but he had been at peace. He had laughed with his friends, and enjoyed his days, and gone home at night to sleep in peace. And now—yes, he had contrived to wreck himself on her. She had ruined his life all right——

The telephone bell rang in the manager's office. Had they sent for him? Were they coming for him now?

No.

All day must that bell, every few minutes, drill its terror through him? Take up a proposal and read it. "If proposal is for joint life, what is the relationship to the other proposer?" Happy people, these, in homely rooms, with no menace approaching them except Death far away, for whose visit they were ordering, not without dignity, their small hospitality.

His eyes swung to the doors, and he asked himself, Who are these, What do they want? A director, the Secretary, and an unknown visitor had come into the department, and were walking

towards the manager's office. Were they come about him? Would the manager summon him into the office?

No. It was just business as usual. The business of the policy department ticked on like a clock, or like a death-watch beetle, heedless of him.

Now the manager came from his cubicle, carrying a book and some papers, and left the room; and the faces of neighbouring clerks turned to Lawrie for a brief interlude of badinage and laughter.

"What the hell's the matter with our Lawrie?" said one, a man older than most, with a bald head and eyes that stayed serious, while his lips tried not to smile. "He's as glum as a wet Monday morning, and, what's more, he's the colour of a cold potato. It can't be that he's been overworking. What have you had for lunch, Lawrie?"

"I'm all right." Lawrie smiled bravely. An heroic animal is the weakest man. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Let him alone," said another. "He's in love; everybody knows that. It's the sweetie that rings him up sometimes."

"Yes, he's had *her* for lunch, and she's been cold to him."

"Oh, shut up! I never felt better in my life." (Dead, dead. And exposure for him; with eyes gazing at him in interest and pity. Pity where he had had envy.)

"Lawrie, my dear." Roger Cameron, the long-haired humourist at the table behind was reading from a form which he held in his hand. "Are you now in good health? Are you free from mental or bodily disease or infirmity?"

"No, I'm not. *You're* a mental disease I'm suffering from."

"Ha! Witty. What medical attention have you received during the last five years? Better not ask. Are you of strictly temperate habits? Ah, that's what we should like to know."

Lawrie laughed again. "I shan't feel temperate in a moment."

"No, but listen, Lawrie, my dear, has your mother ever died of consumption?"

"What's more to the point," retorted Lawrie, "is, Are you insured against death by accident?" Strange, one could joke. One's brain, working independently of one's heart, could defend the heart's sick-room with these ready and quickfire retorts.

"That's all right, boys. He's not dead yet. He's still got some kick in him."

Thank God, the manager was returning, and Lawrie could now be alone again; walled in with his thoughts, behind a silence.

But how long? How long must he bear this anxiety which kept his head whirring, his mouth sour, and his bowels sickly? How many hours, how many days, of waiting before he would know if he was to be exposed?

Death : wouldn't death be better than this ?

No, he would hope a little longer. And if he was spared disgrace, oh, the happiness, the healing, the release, like a singing and shouting and clapping of hands ! He would live again. If not, if exposure came, he could always die.

XVIII

"GOOD afternoon."

"Good afternoon, sir. Everything all right?"

"Yes, thanks. Fine. I left the towels in there."

"That'll be O.K. Well, then, good day to you, sir."

"Good day."

And Roddy was in the street, no one in the Public Baths having troubled to look at him a second time. He crossed Lambeth Road rather quickly, and did not slacken till he was in Oakley Street, and heading for the New Cut. Lambeth Road was too near Lambeth Walk—though, even so, it was unlikely that anyone would recognize him here. His fellow assistants in the shop were tethered to their counters for hours yet, and most of the customers were women; and no women in South London bought evening papers. Still, the story might be passing over the counters with the groceries, so let him hurry on. Once in Southwark or Bermondsey, he would feel secure, for it was a purely local trade in his branch of Hodson and Cooper's.

He passed several newsbills, as he hastened towards security. They leaned against the sills of shops, hung clipped to railings, and fluttered like aprons from newsboys' knees. "South London Woman Found Murdered." "Girl Wife Smothered. Strange Story From Brixton." "The Old Lane Murder. Hunt For Man."

But he only glanced at them as he went by. Not till he was in the New Cut, and the frontiers of danger were passed, did he abate his haste and stand at times to look at the placards. From now on he just lounged and wandered. He wandered round busy corners, down noisy highways, and along quiet side streets where little traffic or business came. He wandered from Southwark into Bermondsey, and round by Walworth into Newington, and from Newington to the borders of Kennington again. He was wandering from newsagent to newsagent, and from street to street, much as man in an art gallery wanders from picture to picture, and from room to room. South London was sprinkled with newsagents. Hardly a street but had its little newspaper, tobacco, and confectionery shop; and Roddy sauntered and crossed from this one to that one, and ever sought another

beyond. So may an actor, in a Public Reading Room, saunter from newspaper to newspaper, on the morning after his *première*.

"Young Wife Found Murdered In Lambeth." "South London Man Hunt Begins." "Old Lane Tragedy. Yard Called In." "Old Lane Murder. New Developments."

He did not buy a paper. He dared not read Fay's name, or a description of that room, or the misinterpretations and sly vilifications of himself which would wound more than poisoned barbs. All hurt he avoided, seeking only the thin satisfaction that was the gift of his notoriety. He was Someone at last: someone of whom all England was talking.

Or so he thought at first, till he observed how the newsbills were adapted to their locality. In Lambeth it was a "Lambeth Murder"; in remoter parts it was a "South London Tragedy"; in Walworth, as he drew near to Camberwell and Brixton, it was a "Murder in Old Lane"; but beyond the marches of South London, it was not mentioned at all. It was of only local interest, then? He perceived this, and was somewhat disappointed.

Evening was lowering upon London before his meal was finished and his stomach had turned alike from notoriety and from disappointment. Not a face had looked twice at him. He had passed policemen standing at corners, and they had shown no more interest in him than in the man before him or the man behind him. Indeed, they had shown little interest in anybody or anything, seeming rapt in their own reveries. And a slack, indifferent bravado, mingled with the thirst for danger, led him slowly back to Lambeth.

Coming up Newington Causeway to St. George's Circus, he saw the green stretches of Bedlam Park. Bedlam Park they called it in the streets around, because the high, black building in its centre, creeper-hung, had once been the most famous asylum in the world, and up and down these green plats, for a hundred years, the inmates of Bedlam had mooned with their visions and their fears and their melancholy. As melancholy as any of them, he strolled into their green haunt, and idled along the littered asphalt paths, under the great spreading planes. Beneath the meeting branches of a plane and a sycamore he sank on to a bench and stretched his arm along its back. And, turning his head, he looked behind him at the rolling sward and the great lonely trees and the stately black madhouse lifting its cupola against the sky. The leaves were already brown, and many of them freckled the blue-green carpet of grass.

Here, as in every London park, the old men sat alone with their pipes, sometimes clearing their throats with an exhaustive

thoroughness and spitting the outcome on to the paths. A blind man, led by a straining dog, and muttering to it, passed Roddy where he sat. Girls walked by, carrying their shrill gossip with them; and children raced along the avenues, kicking pebbles, leaping rails, or chasing one another. A company of slouching and sniggering youths, any one of whom, Roddy thought, might be the wanted man, loafed towards a wooden shelter, where, if their laughter was any guide, they enjoyed a lecherous talk.

Twilight fell about him, and the promise of dark. The dark. It would be welcome in that it would mask his features and cover his movements; but to what end? What would he do in the dark?

Oh, keep away, keep away. A man, nearing sixty, lined and withered with the weather, his clothes an odd lot, and his grey hair lagging beneath his cap, had come and sat himself on the seat, three feet away from him. And he was going to talk.

"Nice evening, ain't it, sir?"

"What? Oh yes . . . yes . . . very nice."

"Gawd, I'm tired, sir—tired, tired, tired, and that's the truth, sit. I musta walked twenty miles since this morning. Yuss, that, and more. I don't suppose you'd care to give me the price of a cuppa tea, guv'nor. Just a copper or two, if you could spare it."

"Ah, well." Roddy felt in his pocket for a sixpence, but found only a shilling. He handed it to the grizzled man, and said no more.

"Gawd! Thank you, sir. That'll get me a doss to-night, as well as something to eat. Gawd bless you, sir. I *have* tried to get work, honest I have, but when you're over fifty, and your 'air's a bit grey, like, no one'll look at yer; no one wants yer——"

Oh, stop talking, stop talking . . .

"You can arst and arst, but no one's got any use for yer; and that's a fact, sir. I had good work in the building trade, up to quite recently I did, and earned my fifty bob or three quid a week; but I lawst it when things began to get bad, and once you're over fifty and outa work, and your strength ain't what it ought to be, for want of any proper grub, you can wear your boots out walking from one end of England to the other and arstin' for a job, and no one——"

What shall I do in the dark? I know I don't want to live. I don't want to be arrested and put in prison and hanged, but I don't want to live either. I can't go through life with the memory of what I done to Fay. And I don't want to live without

her, either. Fifty years I reckon I could hope to live. Fifty years of memory . . . and loneliness . . .

"Yuss, it's a big drop from three quid a week regular to nothing at all, and that quite regular too. You can thank your stars, sir, that you don't know what it's like, never to know where your next meal's coming from, or where you're going to sleep at night——"

"Don't I?" Roddy had heard this; and he suddenly felt jealous for the honour of his own desolation. "That's just where you're wrong. I don't know where I'm going to sleep to-night."

The man turned his sharp little narrow eyes on him. "What you mean? You got your home, ain't you?"

"No."

"What? No father nor mother nor wife nor anything?"

"No. Not now."

"But you got money?"

"I got what I got in my pocket."

"Gawd, and I thought you was a bleedin' swell! But you're in work, ain't you, chum?"

"No. And I shall never get any work again, either."

"Oh nah then, that's nonsense, chum. A well-set-up, gentlemanly young lad like you'll find something to do somewhere, if you set abaht it. Yes, don't you have any dah't abaht it, sonny. What I mean is——"

Death will either be the end of all, so that one just *isn't* any more, or Gee! I wonder whether on the other side of death all will be forgiven and understood somehow, and I shall find Fay again, and we shall yet be able to love perfectly, and be together for evermore. Oh Fay, is it possible, is it possible?

Faintly came the warm glow, the pulsing hope in the heart, as he got back to the dream by which alone he could live. Ever the fantasy, the compensation, the gilded crutches that enable the lame to run, must be returned to and resumed. There was little reasonableness in his hope, perhaps, but he was not dealing with reasonableness, but with comfort.

"And I tell you what, chum: if things are like that with you, I ain't taking this bob. Nah, I ain't doing that. Here: have it back. Go on, sonny: have it back."

"I tell you I shan't want it. I've got some more, and that's enough."

"Well, I don't see how that can be, chum, if you're outa work, and haven't a home. Nah, nah, you keep yer bob. I don't like seeing a young man like you down and out, straight I don't. It's different for me. Nah, take your bloody bob, and if I'd another, I'd give it to you too, by Jesus Christ I would."

"No, honestly. I don't want it, and shan't need it."

"Well, I don't like taking it, and that's a fact. See here, son, shall we spend it together on a nice cuppa tea and a doorstep, eh? I know a nice little caff off the Kennington Road. Yurse, come on, chum."

"No, thanks, old man. I'm not hungry."

Hungry!

"Oh well . . . but don't you go losing heart, son. Don't you lose heart now. You'll get good work soon enough, and forget all abaht these days. You're not finished yet by twenty or thirty years, see. It's only blokes like me what's down and out for good and all."

"Think so?" Roddy smiled. So this old man thought himself the poorer, he who was rich with the right to live: rich with the right to see to-morrow's sun, and to walk in hope through the months and the years, and to talk with men on the way.

"O' course I think so! You've all your life before you, and Gawd bless you in it. I mean that, chum." He got up, purposing to go away and spend his shilling; but he hesitated and, after scratching his grey-bristled chin, turned to Roddy. "Nah . . . Nah . . . Here, take this bob back. Yuss, go on."

"No, that's all right. Don't you worry about me. As a matter of fact, I exaggerated just now."

"How jer mean?"

"I mean, I do know where I'm going to sleep to-night."

"Do yer? . . . Still . . . Nah. There it is. I ain't taking it, see. I can't." He put it on the bench. "But Gawd bless you for having offered it, see. He will, I believe. And I shouldn't be surprised but what He'll help me too for having given it back to you. Strike me! in a kinda way He's doing it now, because it feels better than a cuppa tea to 'a' done what you think's right. Straight it does. I feel fine after that—yuss. Well, so long, chum, I'll be pushing along, and I dessay I'll pick up the price of a night's lodging somewhere. It's getting dark, ain't it? And comin' over a bit chilly, like. A shade too chilly to be sitting around in the garden; 'Home, sweet Home.' Good night, old son: you'll make good all right, see. Don't you have a dah't abaht that. Why, it ain't even twelve o'clock in the morning for you yet and all the best 'ars of the day are in front of you, see. Good-bye, and Gawd bless you."

"Good-bye. Good luck,"

§

Die he would, because in death alone was hope. But how? No matter how complete his decision, it was not easy to see the first steps; and he just sat on, while the darkness thickened and the last of the day's warmth thinned out of the air. The branches of the great planes swayed across the stars, as cold breezes visited the park; and he shivered.

Then he saw the white obelisk standing against the railings, fifty yards over the grass. He had often seen it before, but had never known what it was, nor why it stood there against the railings. Now he crossed the grass towards it, listlessly. It was a tall stone obelisk tapering from a pedestal; and on one face of the pedestal he read in old lettering: "Erected in the XIth. of the reign of King George the Third, MDCCLXXI, the Right Hon. Brass Crosby, Lord Mayor"; and on another face: "One mile from Palace Yard, Westminster Hall."

And at once the words, "Palace," and "Westminster Hall," threw on his mind a picture of the Houses of Parliament and the Archbishop's Palace with the tree-fringed river running between them, as seen from the balustrade of Lambeth Bridge; and with the picture came the idea that he would go and find further pain by visiting the alcove on the bridge where he and Fay had first kissed. But could he bear to look on it? Could he? Doubting, he returned to his seat and sat there glumly. But the bridge was drawing him.

And it drew him. He rose to go to the pain. He left the park and walked up the broad Lambeth Road which led to the bridge. He walked by the wall of the Archbishop's Park and round the graveyard of Lambeth Church, and so came to the sudden view of the bridge with its golden-crested pylons guarding its entrance, and its lamps crossing the river.

It shot such a pain at him that he turned his eyes from it, and looked instead at the great gatehouse of the Archbishop's Palace. He went idly and stood beneath the gatehouse and looked up at it. He looked at the embattled towers flanking the arched gateway, and at the wooden gate with the postern at its side, and at the Gothic window over the gate. He looked at the red Tudor bricks and the white stone dressings, and thought of the men who had laid them, four centuries ago, and how soon they had died and taken their peace.

In the darkening night he stood there, the descendant of the beggars and castaways who had waited by the postern daily, in jerkins and hose and foot-wrappings of straw, for the fragments from His Grace's board and from the tables of the hundred

servants. He stood there, a successor to the fugitive queen, Mary of Modena, who had sheltered under the gatehouse wall. The wooden gate was shut tight as a prison gate; and so was the postern; and there was no light in the tower windows or in the mullioned window over the arch. The palace had no ear for him nor eye, to-night.

From this portal left here by the evanescent centuries he turned to the clean new bridge built yesterday. And he strolled on to it to take his pain. His heart fluttered and sank and became a vessel of pain as he saw the alcove—as he drew near to it. Here she had leaned against him, and entrusted herself into his arms; and he had killed her. Those eyes which had looked up into his: never, never, would he see them again. *Never!*

The alcove was not merciful enough to kill him there, but it had the mercy to put his weapon into his hands. It gave him an idea which hardened faster than metal into a resolve. He walked away with his resolve, almost happy in it. He must waste a few hours before he came back to the bridge. The bridge must be quiet when he came, its footpaths cleared by the night, as they had been on that night of five years ago.

"Let's see: it was a quarter to midnight then. I remember Big Ben striking. I shall be there at the same time. I shall do it at the very time she said she loved me. That'll be kind of fitting, like. But I mustn't be caught before then. Hell, no, *no!*—no one's going to stop me doing it in my own time and my own way. If they think they're going to do that, Fay, darling, they can think again."

The measure of his alarm at the thought of losing his new hope was the measure of his happiness in it. He was happy in the prospect of release from the dull aching of heart and brain; happy in the guilt-assuaging thought of punishing himself; and happy, most happy of all, in the dim hope that within a few hours—only a few hours now—he might find Fay again in some golden place where all would be forgiven and they would love each other perfectly at last, even blending together as one. His body, leaving his own dangerous city behind him, was crossing into Westminster; but his mind was going back, as ever, to the old healing vision. He was hunting the thing that he had always hunted.

Just so did Fay, to the end; but because each needed and sought from the other a slightly different healing, it was written that they should destroy each other.

§

His conflict ended, he was able to think more clearly. His brain seemed a clean white room. What different things he might have done, had his brain from the first been as clear as this! He might have turned on the gas, and lain down beside Fay, and died there. How simple that would have been, and how clever. "A suicide pact," they would have called it; and the world's judgment would have been softened with pity. And thinking this, as he wandered up west, he saw that there was no certainty, even now, that he would be sentenced to death. What might not a clever counsel make of his jealousy and his provocation? Well read in murder tales and murder trials, he saw that a recommendation to mercy was almost certain, and that a verdict of manslaughter was not impossible. Why, at this moment he had in his pocket a crumpled letter that would almost certainly win him the gentler verdict or the reprieve.

But he wanted neither. In prison or out of it, he could not live with the memory of Fay on that bed. And—it broke upon him as he crossed by the Houses of Parliament into Parliament Street—he could purchase mercy only by revealing Fay's guilt; and this he would not do. No. Here was a new light dancing before him, and beckoning him on. It called to the heroic in him, and to the hunger for atonement,

"No, my dear. I shall do my duty by you, see. I shall destroy that letter, before I . . . That's all I can do for you now, but I'll do that. I don't believe there are any other letters in the room—there certainly weren't, the day I searched everywhere—but even if there are, I shall have done my best. A few people know that you were carrying on with another fellow, but who knows how much? Who even knows his name? And they shan't ever know, my darling, not if I can help it. Your Lawrie won't speak unless they find him, and even Mr. Ginger Gowry'll have a job to find him, I think, if I put this letter where *he* can't get at it. No, we'll defeat Mr. Gowry together, you and I; and no one'll ever know how far you went with your Lawrie . . . or how far I was driven into doing what I done. And when they find me, they'll let him be, I guess. I don't mind. I don't seem to feel very angry with him any more, or to want to blame him. I can understand. I can understand all that he felt and all that he did. I guess he was hungry like what I used to be, and looking for someone to love; and if you encouraged him, letting him hold you, and looking up at him with those eyes of yours, like you used to with me, well, I reckon he'd have had to be a bigger hero than most of us are, to resist you. A much bigger hero than I

am. And good God, how can *I* judge him, or anyone, after what I done? Let him be—and, anyhow, he's probably suffering enough. He must be suffering hell, poor devil, if he's heard by now that . . . that you're dead. Let him be. Besides, you were fond of him, so let him be. Of course I know that people'd judge me a lot less hardly if they knew all, but I'm just not going to let 'em know, my dear. It's all I can do for you now, but I'll do that."

This fine resolve, with its pale nimbus of heroism, added to his happiness. Here was almost a happy youth walking with the people across Trafalgar Square and rambling past the theatres in St. Martin's Lane. The old egoist in him, craving sympathy and applause, wished at moments that someone in the world should know of his small portion of sacrifice; and for a little he played with the idea of writing a last confidential letter to the Muswells before whom he desired so poignantly to stand well—but no, for Fay's sake, he tossed the idea aside. No, he would do his deed in the dark.

"Yes, Fay, my darling, that's settled. I'll tell no one; not even the Muswells. I've hurt you enough."

And because this oblation of his need for the Muswells' praise cost him very dear, he was happy in it.

He was a long way from Lambeth Bridge when the chimes of Big Ben called him back. But he heard them. He was sitting in a café on the far side of Regent's Park, sipping a coffee, and listening to the dance music from a loud speaker; and the dance music faded out; and there in the shop, almost at his ear, Big Ben clanged the four quarters, and struck eleven times.

In his heroic mood he chose to regard it as his summons; and he rose at once, and paid his bill, and walked out.

Slowly, for he must move as slowly as Time, he sauntered back to the river. Sleep. A few gasps of terror and pain, like Fay's as was fitting—the same as Fay's—and then the ecstasy of sleep. Hardly less happily than a man who, late at night, goes yawning home to bed, he walked along the mysterious and shimmering streets of the west, and through the dim, shifting people, to the place that promised him sleep. "What's the most beautiful thing in the world, Daisy? Sleep."

Twenty minutes to twelve; and the bridge was empty. For long spells it would be empty. Thames House was dark behind him as he walked towards the alcove; and the Archbishop's Palace was dark in front of him, His Grace abroad. And all Lambeth behind the palace seemed dark, too.

In the alcove he stood and looked downstream. The Houses of Parliament were a black crocketed mass against the copper glow in the sky, only Big Ben showing its big disc of light like a big yellow moon. Twenty to twelve. On Westminster Bridge

there was still some traffic, the toy buses and lorries carrying their lights, like the models in a shooting gallery, between the stationary lamps, whose reflections lay splintered on the water. He looked down at the water. The tide was running upstream strongly, and a wind from the south-west slanted its waves towards the Lambeth bank. It swept round the pier of the bridge, and slid, a glistening, cinder-black film, into the tunnel under the span. But in the lee of the Middlesex bank the river seemed stagnant and black as tar—as still and dark as the notion of Nothing and Not-being.

Steps rang behind him. He turned and saw two lovers strolling over the bridge, the boy's arm round the shoulders of the girl. Lovers! He watched them strolling on towards the southern bank, and once he saw the boy bend his head to kiss the upturned lips of the girl. From the clock-face in the sky came the clanging quarters, and he stepped—but, alas, at that minute a bus ambled up the easy gradient from Westminster, and down the straight slope into Lambeth. Nothing may be done quite perfectly in this world. His perfect minute went by.

Now the bridge was deserted again. Now. He tore the letter of many pages into eight times as many pieces and, standing on the granite step, dropped them into the water. He saw the water catch them and sweep them under the span. He ran to the other side of the bridge, but not so fast as they; reaching the parapet, he saw them, a hundred white flecks, travelling on the dark tide towards Vauxhall.

"There, darling. I did it in our own place, our own sacred place, as was right, I guess. Nothing now, but——"

But see: two policemen standing in talk at the point where the downstream footpath turned on to the Westminster embankment. Hastily he lit a cigarette, and walked with a leisurely gait towards the Albert Embankment on the opposite side of the river. Here, as he crossed the road between the gold-crested pylons, his sidelong glance saw the policemen breaking company and walking their different ways. And cautiously he returned towards the alcove.

Remember all, reassemble every memory into an aggregate that cannot be borne, so that you are charged with strength to do it. Realize, realize, and you will not delay. Her laughing, dilating eyes, her shy, twisting smiles, her rapturous embraces, her leaping and joyous zest in life—and now her life lies cancelled—ice-cold, ice-cold her brow—and *I* did it. "Oh, yes, yes, Fay. There is nothing else for me but this." Never, never, to see her again, unless perhaps . . . "Oh, yes, yes, my dear."

One last look at the palaces, not without an amazement of

farewell, and he drew himself on to the parapet of the alcove, and let himself fall into the dark, gliding water, where, beneath a little terror, a few gasping throes, lay the exquisite places of sleep. The tide, driving on between the walls men had set for it, bore him under the span, and a little farther from the bed where Fay, with her hands crossed, lay asleep.

